

In The Bahamas “She Must Give It Up”: Sexual Abuse of Women in Heterosexual Relationships by their Intimate Partners

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Abstract

This study analyses the treatment of Bahamian women in heterosexual relationships by their intimate partners focusing on instances of sexual and psychological abuse. An internet survey obtained information from 464 married and 1,264 unmarried women currently in intimate relationships with men. Married women were more likely than unmarried women in intimate relationships to report non-consensual sexual intercourse. Married women who admitted to being victims of non-consensual sexual intercourse or reported having been raped by their husband were more likely to have been physically harmed by their husband than those who had not suffered non-consensual sex or rape. Likewise, psychological abuse was more evident in married than unmarried women. The results indicate that behaviours of concern are inflicted by men on their female intimate partners both inside and outside of marriage. The finding that abusive behaviours, including non-consensual sex and psychological abuse, are more common within marriage than outside of marriage requires further study.

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Introduction

Concern over the treatment of women by their intimate partners has been an ongoing issue in The Bahamas and is one which makes national headlines (Rolle, 2022a). Bethell-Bennett (2016) has highlighted the gender imbalance in favour of males in Bahamian society as one based upon male power and is rooted in Bahamian cultural and legal inequality. Rape is almost certainly more common than the official Bahamian

statistics suggest (“Discrepancy in Crime Statistics Questioned,” 2014) and rape is the crime most feared by women in The Bahamas (Bethel & Fielding, 2020).

A discussion on the actions taken to prohibit sexual violence in The Bahamas is summarised at the Organization of American States Fourteenth Meeting of the Committee of Experts (2017) in its review of The Bahamas. Further, a summary of the legal framework regarding sexual violence is given

by UNWomen Caribbean (2015) and gaps in the legal protection of victims is provided by Blaney et al. (2020). The *Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 1991* (Sect. 3) provides a legal definition of rape in The Bahamas; this definition focuses on age, and consent to sexual intercourse. In The Bahamas, lack of consent to sexual intercourse appears to be the most accepted aspect which can result in sexual intercourse being considered rape (Bethel & Fielding, 2020).

Per current statutes in the Bahamas, a man cannot be charged with rape of his spouse (see Sect. 3 of the *Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act, 1991*). While rape cannot occur within marriage, the Supreme Court of The Bahamas has ruled that when men treat their wives “cruelly,” and this includes forcing their wives to have sexual intercourse, this is grounds for divorce (AA v. BB, 2021). Notwithstanding such a judgment, the public attitudes to the so-called marital rape exception was evident in 2022 at a meeting to discuss proposed changes to the *Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act, 1991* (Rolle, 2022b). At that event, one participant claimed that when a married man wished to have sexual intercourse with his wife, “she must give it up,” with “it” referring to her body, for the sexual gratification of her husband. This statement is of interest, as “must give” implies a demand which must be met; there is no sense of “giving” or gift, or a voluntary action associated with “must.” That is, her voluntary consent to participate in the sexual act is not required—she has no choice; the man denies her agency and the respect due a woman (Bethel & Fielding, 2020). This statement seems to echo attitudes which have resonated down the millennia from Roman times (Anderson, 1989). Further, studies in North America (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000) and The Bahamas have demonstrated that sexual violence is associated with other acts of violence

(Fielding & Ballance, 2022) which indicate the violent nature of some men who force themselves on their wives. As others have pointed out, the marital rape exception in law is a violation of the human rights of women (Pracher, 1981).

The legal basis of the marital rape exception has been perpetuated in legal systems since the 18th and supported by clergy (Edwards et al., 2011). The longevity of this attitude within various cultures, including The Bahamas, helps to reinforce the societal attitude that rape cannot occur within marriage (Jones, 2022) and adds to the trauma experienced by wives who endure such abuse (Agarwal et al., 2022). The fact that their rape is not always recognized as an act of rape, adds to their invalidation, and limits the likelihood that they will seek justice even when it is available (Bennice & Resnik, 2003). Rape victims can have lower self-esteem, psychological, and physical health functioning for many years after the event (Sachs-Ericsson et al., 2014), and these effects can be ignored because they seem unrelated to the abuse. The psychological abuse associated with sexual violence is typically less appreciated than other harm resulting from such victimisation; however, these effects can be exacerbated when occurring within the context of marriage (Mahoney & Williams, 1998). The benevolent safety expected within marriage can be exploited to uphold the belief that husbands cannot rape their wives.

Sexual violence goes beyond the physical acts of violence and includes controlling behaviours which abusers can use to exercise their power over their victim (Bennice & Resnick, 2003). These include pushing, cursing, threatening, denying freedom, etc (Bahamas Crisis Centre, 2021). Some of these levers of control are clearly physical, while others are more subtle but still inflict harm.

Williams et al. (2021) demonstrated the long-lasting trauma which sexual violence can cause women. They also found that 81.7% of women who had suffered sexual abuse thought that the event(s) had negatively affected their mental health, but only 5.6% had sought help for their mental problems. That study's results are consistent with reports by those women who have publicly shared their experiences of sexual abuse (Fielding & Ballance, 2022). As Sackett and Saunders (1999) state, psychological abuse can discourage a victim of sexual abuse from leaving the relationship and can also result in depression, self-doubt, confusion, and low self-esteem.

The enduring trauma suffered by females subject to rape in The Bahamas has been demonstrated by Williams et al. (2021) and is consistent with studies from elsewhere, for example, South Africa, Oshodi et al. (2020). Thus, rape is a crime which, in a sense, never leaves the victim (Indupalli & Giri, 2014). These findings confirm the apparent inadequacy of the current law which permits a man who has repeatedly imposed himself on his wife through actions which outside of marriage, would have been termed rape, to walk away free from a court of justice (Ward, 2022).

Since the start of the century, there have been two failed attempts, starting with a 2002 referendum that sought to outlaw gender discrimination and amend laws that discriminate against married women (Benjamin & LeGrand, 2012). The second referendum, in 2016, focused on the need to remove inequalities in the law between men and women. In both Benjamin and Legrand's (2012) and Bethell-Bennett's (2016) studies it is evident that some Christian community leaders, particularly evangelical leaders, have maintained that wives are subject to their husbands, that rape within marriage cannot occur and that the State should not legislate

what happens between a married man and woman. The debates surrounding these issues highlighted a difference in views on the status of women between secular and religious leaders (Bethell-Bennett, 2016) and how proposed changes to the sexual offences act has been politicized (see, for example, Virgil, 2014; and Strachan, 2022). However, it should be noted that there is also disagreement within government as to whether the act of "rape" within marriage should be outlawed and how (Strachan, 2022).

Alongside national "conversations" called by various political parties on marital rape (Wells, 2019; Russell, 2021) is the concern that The Bahamas has a comparatively high rate of sexual violence within the Caribbean Region (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2023) and rape (Virgil, 2016), even though reported rapes have been declining in recent years (Rolle, 2022a). There is also a perception that a high rate of rape is a potential threat to tourism, the key driver of the Bahamian economy (Scavella, 2017). The connection between alcohol use and rape (Gulati et al., 2020) and the comparatively high alcohol consumption in The Bahamas (Bahamas Ministry of Health, 2019) is another factor which may help to explain why the rape figures are a cause for concern. Linkages between lifestyle etc. demonstrate the complex nature of the influences that exacerbate the occurrence of rape (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022) and are a worldwide concern (Alkan & Tekmanlı, 2021).

The Bahamas has signed various international treaties to protect the rights of women, treaties which it has so far not implemented, despite the concerns of human rights organizations (Bahamas National Task Force for Gender-Based Violence, 2015). As such, The Bahamas is one of a minority of countries around the world and within the

Commonwealth of Nations that has not outlawed marital rape (Bethel, 2019). Despite the views of the electorate expressed in the failed referenda, in 2015 the Government of The Bahamas published a *Strategic Plan to Address Gender-based Violence*, acknowledging the difficulties women still face. However, to date, not all its recommendations have been implemented, one of which included the creation of a Gender-Based Violence Authority. The published draft of the *National Development Plan of The Bahamas* (Bahamas Government, 2016) also acknowledges the need to rectify matters concerning gender inequality (for example, Goal 3).

In discussions on removing the marital rape exception in the *Sexual Offences and Domestic Violence Act of 1991*, government officials have reminded the public that there are no official government statistics on the occurrence of marital rape (Cartwright-Carroll, 2022). Research from North America suggest that between 10-14% of married women are raped by their husbands (Monson & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1998) and in Kenya "more than one in 10 married women admitted to" being raped by their husbands in the last year (African Population and Health Research Center, 2010). More recent reviews have reported higher percentages of coercion to participate in sexual intercourse in India (Agarwal et al., 2022), and so points to potential cultural differences in its occurrence.

A report from the Bahamas Ministry of Health (2019) indicates that 17.6% of women have experienced a sex act against their will. In Jamaica, estimates of interpersonal violence (which can include sexual violence) suggest that about 30% of women were victims within the previous 12 months (Fraser, 2019). The stigma associated with sexual violence means that reporting these crimes is likely to result in underestimates

(Fielding & Ballance, 2022), and this has led to disagreement over official figures of sexual crimes in The Bahamas ("Discrepancy in Crime Statistics Questioned", 2014). As indicated by Fielding and Ballance (2022) ignorance of the law can result in victims being unaware that they have been sexually abused, and so not reporting their victimisation, consequently, contributing to under-counting. The perceived lack of convictions for rape has led one psychiatrist to ask if rape is a crime in The Bahamas (Neville, 2015).

Alongside the issue of rape is that of adultery (extramarital sex) or at least infidelity in intimate partner relationships. "Sweethearting" is long-standing within Bahamian society (Otterbein, 1966 reported in Grant, 1999). Prior to the 2000s, sweethearting or adultery was found to be equally common in married men than women (12%), but husbands were more likely than wives to have a history of sweethearting, (48% vs 22%; Grant, 1999), the lack of exclusivity, particularly within marriage, may cause tensions in marital relationships (Otterbein, 1963) and so result in psychological abuse, and silent suffering (Atapour et al., 2021). In the Bahamian context where rape myths are prevalent (Williams et al. 2021) and married men protected by the law from having sex with their wives without their consent, some feel that their wife cannot refuse her husband (Wallace, 2018). These situations can therefore prove to be even more psychologically distressing because if she does submit to sexual intercourse she may be doing so without voluntary consent.

Wives whose husbands engage in extramarital sex may decide to refuse sexual advances from their husbands in order to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. We might conjecture that tensions may arise from men seeking sexual

encounters beyond those with their wives and the wives subsequently suffering a loss of self-esteem. Given the prevalence of sweethearting, some have suggested that removing the legal marital rape exception might provide an avenue by which wives could seek "revenge" on their husbands for their infidelity (see, for example, Benjamin & LeGrand, 2012). This concern appears to arise from the limited legal recourse that women have in the case of unfaithful husbands (Greene, 2011).

As already noted, the Sexual Offences Act does not provide legal protection of married women from rape by their husbands. This means that close to 40% of women over the age of 15 are at risk of rape without legal recourse (Fielding & Ballance, 2022). Therefore, this study was undertaken to obtain a working estimate of the percentage of married and unmarried (single) women who are victims of sexual violence, in particular rape, by the actions of their husbands or boyfriends. Secondly, we wished to demonstrate that women who are subject to sexual violence are also psychologically abused. Consequently, we wished to show that sexual violence in The Bahamas is part of a cocktail of behaviours which harm women beyond physical injuries and thereby help to raise awareness of the enduring harm sexual violence causes.

Previous studies in The Bahamas on the experiences of sexual intercourse, in particular, non-consensual sexual intercourse (for example, Bahamas Ministry of Health, 2019; Fielding & Ballance, 2022) have focused on lifetime experiences. This study has a narrower focus than these earlier studies and examines only the experiences of women in their current heterosexual relationships. As such, this study recognises that relationships are dynamic, and so provides a description of experiences of women in on-going relationships.

Methodology

The target population was adult women (aged 18 years and over) living in The Bahamas and currently in intimate relationships with men. An internet-based survey was devised which included the HITS (Hurt, Insult, Threaten, Scream) index, of Sherin et al. (1998), as an indicator of domestic violence, and a psychological abuse scale (Sackett & Saunders, 1999) slightly modified to make the wording culturally appropriate for The Bahamas. Questions were asked about the respondents' marital status and selected behaviours of the husband/male partner. In recognition that relationships can be dynamic, questions focused only on current partners (irrespective of the duration of the relationship) and their behaviours, and so do not reflect lifetime experiences of abuse. Women who were not in an intimate relationship at the time of the study were omitted. A question regarding the effect of COVID-19 on the participant was included in recognition of the impact of the pandemic on interpersonal violence (Fielding & Ballance, 2020; Peitzmeier et al., 2022). The project was approved by University of The Bahamas' Institutional Review Board.

Students at University of The Bahamas used their social media networks to contact potential respondents, and this seeded a snowball sample. Data were collected between September and October 2022. The target was to obtain information from 1,900 women so that at least 300 married females would be included in the sample. This estimate was based upon the percentages of women in intimate relationships, and the percentage of women who are married using data in Fielding and Ballance (2022).

Results

A total of 2,868 persons entered the survey and four refused to participate. After cleaning

the data so that they reflected the target population, females, aged 18 and over, living in The Bahamas and currently having a relationship with a male intimate partner, 1,728 responses were retained. Overall, 464 or 26.9% of respondents were married, and the remainder (1,264) were either unmarried or engaged, and the overall median age was 28.8 years. The modal educational level was some college/technical vocational training (36.9% of 1,559 responses). The modal length of time of participants' being in this intimate relationship was between one and five years (28.3% of 1,723 respondents).

Activities within the current relationship

A series of nuanced questions focused on consent in sexual intercourse were used to allow for any reluctance of respondents to

admit to sexual abuse (Mahoney & Williams, 1998). Overall, 13.8% (95% CI[10.9, 17.2]) of married women indicated that they had had sexual intercourse against their will and 8.3% (95% CI[6, 11.1]) of married women admitted to having been raped by their husbands (Table 1). Married women were more likely to be subject to non-consensual sex than single women, ($OR = 2.39$, 95% CI[1.68, 3.39]). Being a victim of physical harm (hit) was also more prevalent inside than outside of marriage (see Table 1).

We note that that the data suggest that the length of the relationship is associated with the risk of the woman being victimised by her partner. However, as can be seen in in Table 2, the sample size is not favourable in estimating reliable estimates in relationships of shorter duration.

Table 1 Married and Unmarried Women Reporting Selected Victimization (%)

Activity	Married	Unmarried	<i>p</i>
Subject to non-consensual sex	13.8%	6.3%	< .001
Sexually abused§	12.7%	8.3%	.009
Raped§	8.3%	6.4%	.196
Physically hurt	15.3%	10.9%	.016

Note: §Yes or probably yes. *p* from χ^2 test

Table 2 Women Reporting Selected Forms of Abuse (% Within Length of Relationship)

Length of relationship (years)	Subject to non-consensual sex				Raped by partner				Hurt by partner			
	Married	<i>n</i>	Unmarried	<i>n</i>	Married	<i>n</i>	Unmarried	<i>n</i>	Married	<i>n</i>	Unmarried	<i>n</i>
< 1	33.3%	3	2.5%	324	33.3%	3	4%	323	0	2	4%	299
~1	16.7%	6	6.3%	189	16.7%	6	4.8%	189	20%	5	7.1%	170
> 1 < 5	13%	46	6.7%	430	6.5%	46	7.9%	431	15.6%	45	13.4%	397
> 5 < 10	16.5%	85	9.9%	191	11.8%	85	9.4%	191	15.2%	79	15.7%	185
> 10	13%	316	10.1%	89	7.3%	316	5.6%	89	15.4%	298	21.2%	85
Overall	13.8%	456	6.3%	1223	8.3%	456	6.5%	1223	15.4%	429	10.9%	1136
<i>p</i>	.79		.005		.29		.078		.98		< .001	

There was an association with marriage and having children (Table 3). However, this takes place in a society where men have children and sexual intercourse with women outside of their current relationship (Table 3). While 46.7% of married women indicated they believed that their husband was definitely not having sex with another women, the respondents reported that up to 53.3% of husbands may have been committing adultery as many married women

were "not sure." Almost one in four married women knew that their partner was adulterous.

Of the unmarried women, 5.4% (of 1,248) reported having a relationship with a man whom they knew was married, and another 1.8% were not sure. Women reported that their male partners had had children and relationships with other women (Table 3).

Table 3 Married and Unmarried Women Reporting Activities About their Partner (%)

Activity in the relationship	Married	Unmarried	<i>p</i> =
You have had children with your partner	72.4%	14.7%	< .001
Your partner had children with other women	34%	30.6%	.133
Partner has sex with women other than yourself	24.8%	17.1%	< .001

Note: *p* from χ^2 test

For succinctness, given the associated nature of the three abuse questions in Table 1, all of which reflect sexual intercourse without consent, and so include rape, we focus on non-consensual sexual intercourse. Physical violence was more common inside of marriage than outside of marriage (15.3% of married women compared with 10.9% of unmarried women were physically harmed by their partners, Fishers' Exact Test, $N = 1,568, p = .019$). Experience of physical harm was also linked with unwanted sex, Table 4.

Being a victim of physical harm elevated the chance of the woman being subject to non-consensual sexual intercourse. Being in a relationship where the male partner had sex with other partners or had non-consensual the respondent was associated with an increased HITS score (sex with other partners; ANOVA, $F(2, 1,556) = 52.1, p < .001$; non-consensual sex, $t = 18.9, df = 1,558, p < .001$) compared to when the male did not act in these ways.

Table 4 Ever Physically Hurt by Partner (%)

Experience of physical violence	Respondent subject to non-consensual sex		<i>p</i> =
	Married	Unmarried	
Harmed	42.4%	31.7%	.142
Not harmed	8.8%	3.1%	< .001

Note: *p* from χ^2 test

In the case of women who suffered non-consensual sex, they were more likely to have also suffered physical harm from their husbands than wives who were not subject to non-consensual sex, $OR = 7.67$, 95% CI[4.15, 14]. Even when married women were not subjected to physical harm, they were 3.07 times more likely to have non-consensual sex than unmarried women [95% CI[1.84, 5.11].

Overall, 38.2% of 60 married women who had non-consensual sex indicated that they would leave the relationship if they could, compared to 11.5% of 357 married women who had not experienced non-consensual sex ($\chi^2 = 41.4$, $N = 417$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$).

Psychological abuse

The psychological abuse scale of Sackett and Saunders (1999) scores each item one for *never*, to seven for *daily* frequencies, so lower values indicate less frequent psychological abuse. Cronbach's α for the psychological abuse scale was .91, indicating acceptable reliability. Psychological abuse was correlated with the HITS score ($r = .75$, $p < .001$) and so indicating an association between domestic violence and psychological abuse. To provide a frame of reference of the psychological abuse scores, we summarise the overall scores in Table 5.

Table 5 Mean Psychological Abuse Scores

Aspect	M	SE	Minimum score	Maximum score
Overall psychological abuse score	34.1	.42	21	147
Jealous control	15.6	.17	8	56
Ignore	7.6	.13	5	35
Ridicule traits	6.6	.11	5	35
Criticize behaviour	4.2	.07	3	21

ANCOVA, with the effect of COVID-19, and the length of relationship as covariates, was used to estimate the physiological abuse scores in relationships where the woman was subject to non-consensual sex, after accounting for infidelity in the relationship, Table 6. (These covariates were used in response to concerns raised by Stewart et al., 2021, about negative effects of COVID-19 on mental health and the findings in Table 2). These analyses indicated the level of psychological abuse was typically higher when the woman was subject to non-consensual sex and that married women who had non-consensual sex had lower abuse scores than unmarried women who had non-consensual sex. In all dimensions of psychological abuse, the abuse score was

statistically higher for women who had non-consensual sex (ANCOVA using length of relationship, age group and effect of COVID-19 as covariates, $p < .001$). Only for the Jealous Control dimension there was a statistical difference between the abuse scores for married and unmarried women ($p = .014$), with married women having a score of 18.2 ($SEM = .48$) and unmarried women, 19.8 ($SEM = .39$). Table 6 also indicates that the pattern of psychological abuse varied by the dimension of the abuse as the Ignore dimension showed a coercion by marital status interaction.

Table 6 Mean Psychological Abuse Scores

Dimension of abuse	Non-consensual sex		No non-consensual sex		Interaction <i>p</i> =
	Married	Unmarried	Married	Unmarried	
Overall psychological abuse score	55.8	60	31.1	32.4	.32
Jealous control	22.5	24.3	14	15.3	.72
Ignore	13.1	14.7	7.3	7	.03
Ridicule traits	12.5	13	5.9	6.1	.67
Criticize behaviour	7.3	7.6	4	3.9	.47

Note: Adjusted means, age group, using length of relationship and effect of COVID-19 as covariates.

As would be expected with the high correlation between psychological abuse and the domestic violence score, domestic violence scores were higher when women reported being subject to non-consensual sex ($p < .001$) and there was no difference between the scores of married and unmarried women ($p = .35$).

An elevated psychological abuse score, 47.5, was associated with wanting to leave the relationship, compared to 30.3 for those who did not want to leave, and 38.3 for those women who were unsure (ANCOVA, $F(2, 1,421) = 110.9, p < .001$).

Discussion

In discussing the results, we should note that this was an internet-based study. While The Bahamas has a high penetration of Internet usage (87% according to the World Bank, 2020), a convenience sample, such as the one obtained in this study, is subject to potential bias. A bias is evident in the age distribution of married women compared to the last census (Bahamas National Statistical Institute, personal communication, 2022). When the percentage of raped, married women from this study was adjusted by the age distribution of married women in the

census, the figure was similar at 8%, and the corresponding figure of women having non-consensual sex within marriage was 13.4%, both within the margins of error from this study. We also note that there are competing way of assessing psychological abuse (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2014) and these have various strengths and weaknesses (Follingstad, 2009). While other assessment methods may have provided different results, we conjecture that the inferences made using other scales would have been similar to those we report.

Fielding and Ballance (2022) estimated that between 11.8%-18.3% of ever-married women had been raped by a long-term partner. The figure from that study is consistent with a Bahamas Ministry of Health estimate of 17.6% of all women experiencing non-consensual sexual intercourse (Bahamas Ministry of Health, 2019) and is also close to the 95% confidence limits of the estimate of non-consensual sex within relationships of 10 years or more from this study (9.4%-15.8%). This may suggest that the bias in this study may not be large and due to the fact that this study focused on abuse in current relationships, it would be expected that the estimates of occurrence of abuse would be less than for lifetime occurrences. The

conjecture that women are more likely to admit to non-consensual sex rather than rape is based upon studies such as Mahoney and Williams (1998), and so suggests that the figure for non-consensual sexual intercourse may be a more realistic estimate of the occurrence of rape. The prevalence of marital rape indicated by the studies above is in line with those reported by Monson and Langhinrichsen-Rohling (1998) and in Kenya (13%; African Population and Health Research Center, 2010).

It is apparent that women in married and unmarried relationships have different experiences with their intimate partners. Table 2 suggests that even within the current relationship, longer relationships are associated with a higher risk of abuse. However, a larger sample size would be required to obtain more reliable information on this aspect. Future research on the Bahamian community might focus on when sexual violence starts in an adult intimate relationship and when it has the greatest risk of occurring. The prevalence of sexual violence tends to be higher in married than in non-married relationships and this is associated with physical harm (Tables 1 and 3) and domestic violence. These findings are consistent with previous studies (for example, Bethel & Fielding, 2020) where fear of their male intimate partner resulted in females participating in non-consensual sexual intercourse. The association between domestic violence and sexual abuse reported by Plumridge and Fielding (2009) was also found here. This reminds us that abusive actions between parental figures in the household can affect all members within the home (Carroll et al., 2016).

In common with studies from elsewhere (for example, the United States (Bergen & Bukovec, 2006), the women in this study were subjected to both physical violence and sexual abuse; further married women were at

higher risk of harm than unmarried women. This may be a manifestation of the exception that Bahamian law currently provides for married couples regarding spousal abuse. The so-called marital rape exception does not recognise rape within marriage, although "cruel" behaviour by a spouse can be grounds for divorce (*AA v. BB*, 2021). If men indeed feel empowered to force their wives to "give it up" on demand, that is, they are entitled to sexual intercourse with their wife without her consent, this may result in sexual violence. Benjamin and LeGrand (2012) have indicated the role of leaders of the evangelical Christian community in opposing any change to Bahamian law concerning rape within marriage; an opposition which persists (Rolle, 2022b) and so may empower married men to have sexual intercourse with their wives, even when she is unwilling.

Despite women reporting that they were abused, not all of them felt able to leave the relationship. This is associated with comparatively few sexually abused women reporting their abuse to the authorities (Fielding & Ballance, 2022). This in turn makes it difficult for them to receive the help which they need. Reports in the newspapers confirm how society and the stigma of sexual abuse can conspire to discourage women to leave abusive relationships (Fielding & Ballance, 2022). While such observations are not unique to The Bahamas, the small size of the country makes it difficult for a woman to leave an abusive partner without fear that he might find her and inflict further violence upon her.

Sexual abuse is not only associated with physical harm or confined to any geographical location (Agarwal et al., 2022). Williams et al. (2021) demonstrated the trauma which is associated with just one experience of rape in the lives of women in The Bahamas. While the mental and psychological harm associated has been

demonstrated in the literature, and is acknowledged in The Bahamas (Bahamas Crisis Centre, 2021), this study allows us to appreciate the psychological harm which sexual abuse inflicts upon women. In the study of Bergen and Bukovec (2006) of abusive men, many of them inflicted psychological abuse on their partners. When discussing the psychological impact of sexual abuse, we need to be aware of other factors such as age (Twenge et al., 2019) or COVID-19 (Stewart et al., 2021). For these reasons, these factors were included as covariates in our analysis of psychological abuse to account for these influences. Notwithstanding these influences, the higher Jealous Control score associated with unmarried women seems to emerge from the controlling behaviours found in student relationships in The Bahamas (Nicolls et al., 2014) and demonstrates how aspects of childhood relationships may persist into adulthood. If this is the case, these studies indicate the need to teach school children about healthy teen relationships (Nicolls et al., 2014).

Tension in the homes associated with sexual abuse becomes evident with women wanting to leave relationships, and this desire is associated with increased psychological abuse. However, as pointed by Sackett and Saunders (1999), psychological abuse can make it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships. This is also apparent in the case studies reported by Fielding and Ballance (2022). Therefore, it is clear that women can continue to live in relationships where they are subject to domestic violence and psychologically abused, and yet also participate in society, so the negative effects of this abuse can be expected to affect others in society (Johnson, 2016).

Government of The Bahamas data indicate that many men have multiple partners (Bahamas Ministry of Health, 2019). This

finding is repeated in this study where male partners are not always faithful to their current intimate partner, married or unmarried. Our data suggest that extramarital sex was more common than unfaithfulness towards unmarried women (Table 3). The lack of a singular relationship with their current partner is reflected in men having had children with other partners. Despite the sexual health concerns associated with unprotected sex (Wang et al., 2014), women are not always dissuaded in having relationships with men who have had children with other women. Grant (1999) found that infidelity was an-going practice of 12% of married Bahamian men, and 66% of married had ever been involved in sweethearting; this latter figure is not out of line with that found here. However, both these figures are above the 20% of men who commit adultery in North America (Wang, 2018).

Stavrova et al. (2022) noted that partner well-being declines prior to infidelity occurring. Given the association between infidelity and sexual abuse and associated behaviours (Fielding & Ballance, unpublished raw data), sexual abuse is a demonstration of an already failed relationship. The tensions which infidelity brings to an intimate relationship in the Bahamian context require further study. No data were collected on the number of current intimate partners of the female respondent. Such information would allow for an assessment of sexual abuse in exclusive relationships and relationships where both parties had multiple partners.

This study adds to our appreciation of not only the physical harm but also of the hidden harm, the psychological abuse, which sexual abuse inflicts on women within imitate partnerships. As such, the study has indicated that sexual abuse of women has effects which can persist after the physical attack. The finding that harm is more commonly reported

by married women than unmarried women is a cause for concern. As a result, interventions that result in males treating their female intimate partners with greater respect would be beneficial not only to women, but also society at a whole. The fact that Bahamian women have long been concerned about forced sexual intercourse within marriage

(Fiore & Elsasser, 1982) demonstrates the intergenerational fears arising from the limited protection of women from sexual abuse within marriage. Consequently, the study highlights the need for the recommendations of the Bahamas National Task Force for Gender-Based Violence (2015) to be implemented.

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