

## Chapter 8

# THE SPECTRUM OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE



Sexual violence is about power and control and may involve the use of threats, force, or any other form of coercion, manipulation, or intimidation. It is a term used to describe any type of sexual activity committed by a person against another without that person’s consent. In any given situation, there may be more than one offender, and there may be more than one survivor.

“Sexual violence” is an umbrella term for a range of behaviors. Types of sexual violence include, but are not limited to: sexual harassment and gender-based bullying, street harassment, sexual coercion, commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, child sexual abuse, elder sexual abuse, unwanted sexual contact, sexual abuse by a caregiver, stalking, drug- and alcohol-facilitated sexual assault, a power differential which makes sexual contact inappropriate or illegal (e.g., student-teacher or doctor-patient), sexual assault, and sexual violence within the context of an intimate partner relationship. Advocates should not compare different types of sexual violence to one another as all have a profound impact on survivors.

Any sexual activity with a person who is unable to give consent is also considered sexual violence. This includes, but is not limited to, a person who is asleep, impaired, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol and cannot consent to sexual activity. This also includes circumstances where the power difference between the individuals is such that a person cannot consent, such as someone who is incarcerated and a corrections officer, a coach and a high school student, and psychologist and patients. Young children also cannot give consent to sexual activity with an adult.

Some offenders will use physical force or a weapon to overpower a victim. However, they often use various power and control tactics such as threats and manipulation, or substances such as drugs or alcohol and do not involve physical force or the use of a weapon.



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVOCATES



An advocate’s work is to not to define survivors' experience for them, but to honor how survivors describe their experiences. Survivors may or may not choose to label their experiences for a variety of reasons. The choice is theirs. Advocates meet survivors where they are and focus less on labeling and more on listening and providing support to survivors based on what each individual survivor needs.<sup>1</sup>



Often people fear serious injury or death during an act of sexual violence and therefore do not resist the offender(s). This means they may not sustain any bruises, marks, or other visible physical injuries. This can unfortunately cause people to question whether survivors consented to sexual activity, although not resisting is a normal bodily response to trauma.

Sexual violence can occur when either or both/all parties are sober or are under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. The term “sober” may not always mean that there are no substances involved. Drugs and alcohol affect people differently. For example, two people who have had a glass of wine together may have equal power and may still be able to give consent to engage in sexual activity with each other, while others may not.

Sexual violence affects people on many levels and may cause long term physical and mental health concerns, depending on the survivor’s life experiences, the role the offender plays in their life, and their situation at the time of sexual violence.

## Types of Abusive Behavior

Offenders who commit sexual violence use many different types of abusive behaviors. One way to differentiate between these types of behaviors is to keep the following terms and definitions in mind when listening to survivors’ experiences.

These terms could apply to sexual violence experienced by a survivor of any age, but are especially relevant terms for working with older adult survivors and also with individuals with disabilities:

- **Hands-on offenses:** Includes forced kissing; touching breasts, genitals, buttocks; oral/ genital contact; penetration of vagina or rectum with penis, fingers, or objects.
- **Hands-off offenses:** Includes exhibitionism; voyeurism; forced viewing of pornography or other sexually explicit content; sexual harassment; street harassment; and threats.
- **Harmful genital practices:** Involves unwarranted, intrusive, and/or painful procedures in caring for genitals, rectum, or mouth.



## CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADVOCATES



Some models that identify forms of sexual violence rank forms of violation in terms of perceived severity. Those models fall short. Instead, we use a trauma-informed model to understand sexual violence. A trauma-informed approach means that we recognize that we all have different lived experiences shaped by a variety of factors.

The degree of harm that someone experiences and the lasting effects of sexual violence have less to do with the specific form of sexual violence and more about a person’s experience.<sup>2</sup>

## Sexual Violence in Context<sup>3</sup>

### Where does sexual violence take place?

- At home, school, and work
- In families & trusted relationships
- Online and offline
- In medical settings
- At parties
- In public settings
- On dates
- In institutions
- In prisons
- Anywhere

### Who commits sexual violence?

- Acquaintances
- Friends
- Family members
- Partners/significant others
- People with power or authority
- Bosses
- Peers
- Caregivers
- Strangers
- Anyone

### Who are victims of sexual violence?

- Children/Adolescents/Teens/Adults/Older Adults
- People who are and are not incapacitated
- People under the care of someone else
- People of all different races, cultures, genders, classes, ages, sexual orientations, and abilities
- People who may be more vulnerable because of forms of oppression they experience or limited access to help
- Anyone



### Chapter 8

Any sexual activity with a person who is unable to give consent is sexual violence. Consent cannot be given when a person:<sup>4</sup>

- is intoxicated with drugs and/or alcohol.
- is too young to provide consent.
- is coerced or manipulated into saying yes.
- is mistaken into believing their sexual partner is someone else.
- is forced, threatened, or physically restrained against their will.
- is fearful for their life and well-being or the well-being of others.
- has developmental disabilities or cognitive impairment severe enough to prevent them from understanding and agreeing to sexual activities.

An advocate's role is not to be an investigator, judge, or jury. Advocates believe survivors and support them in defining their own experience. Sometimes legal definitions fall short of encapsulating all of the experiences of survivors; this does not invalidate a survivor's experience, but may limit their access to criminal or legal recourse.<sup>5</sup>

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Used with permission from and thanks to: National Sexual Violence Resource Center. (n.d.) *Foundations of advocacy training manual*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsvrc.org/foundations-advocacy-training-manual>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ramsey-Klawnsnik, H., Teaster, P. & Mendiondo, M. (2007). Researching clinical practice: The study of sexual abuse in care facilities. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 12(6). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078390306298576>.

<sup>4</sup> VALOR. (2021). VALOR's support for survivors: Training for sexual assault counselors/advocates. Retrieved from: <https://www.valor.us/publications/valor-support-for-survivors-in-english/>

<sup>5</sup> National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 166.

