
Confident, Moderate, Reluctant: Young Women's Trajectories in Their Willingness to Refuse Unwanted Sex

Abigail Weitzman and Allen B. Mallory

INTRODUCTION

Unwanted sex is widely experienced by young women in the United States. For example, studies show that one in ten sexually active teenagers did not want to have sex the first time they had intercourse, and half of them had mixed feelings about it. Another study has shown that two-thirds of college-aged women consented at least once to sex they did not want to have.

These experiences of unwanted sex can negatively impact young adults' mental health as well as their sexual and reproductive health.

Previous research has identified the factors associated with young women agreeing to have unwanted sex, such as previous coercive sexual experiences, low self-esteem, peer pressure, and gender attitudes about sex roles. In addition, research has demonstrated that black women and women with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experience unwanted sex than white and more socioeconomically advantaged women. The higher likelihood of disadvantaged women experiencing unwanted sex is potentially due to their worse access to health care and sexual education as well as relationship norms.

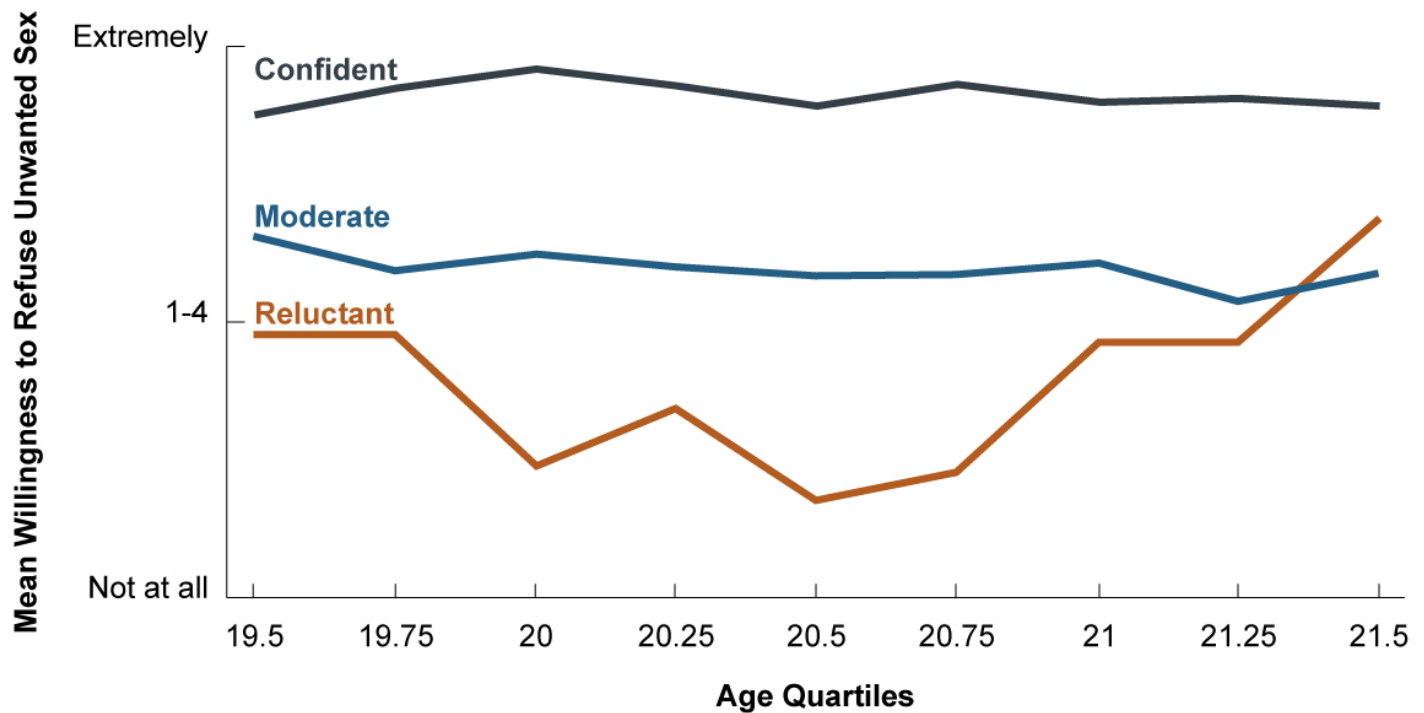
However, much less is known about young women's willingness to refuse unwanted sex. This brief reports on a study that is the first of its kind to examine this willingness to refuse sex and explore how it evolves during the transition to adulthood.

The authors analyze data from the Relationship Dynamics and Social Life study, which recruited young women aged 18 to 19 and followed them for two-and-a-half years. They explore how willing women between the ages of 19.5 and 21.5 believe they would be to refuse unwanted sex if it made their partner angry, what trajectories women follow in their willingness to refuse sex during the transition to adulthood, and how these trajectories vary by socioeconomic status. The authors focused on the 19.5-21.5 age range so that the trajectory analysis was not unduly biased by small numbers of observations for the youngest and oldest respondents.

KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ At ages 18 and 19, approximately one-third of young women were at least somewhat unwilling to refuse unwanted sex, even hypothetically.
- ▶ The average young woman's willingness to refuse unwanted sex declines as she ages from 19.5 to 21.5.
- ▶ There are three primary trajectories by which willingness to refuse unwanted sex evolves (*see figure, next page*):
 - ▶ **Confident** – women begin the transition to adulthood with a high willingness and maintain this level;
 - ▶ **Moderate** – women begin adulthood with a more moderate level of willingness and their willingness declines slightly with time; and
 - ▶ **Reluctant** – women begin adulthood with a moderate level of willingness that tends to decrease to a point near “not willing at all” and then rebound back to moderate levels with time.
- ▶ The evolution of young women's willingness to refuse unwanted sex varies across sociodemographic background.
 - ▶ Socially disadvantaged and African American women are the most likely to follow the reluctant trajectory.
 - ▶ Socially advantaged women and non-African American (mostly white) women are the most likely to follow the confident trajectory.
- ▶ Other characteristics associated with young women being in the reluctant trajectory include: having an early sexual debut, having a child before the first interview (age 18 or 19), and believing in rape myths (*see box, next page*).

Trajectories in young women's willingness to refuse unwanted sex: confident, moderate, and reluctant



This figure¹ shows that women in the confident trajectory are closest to being extremely willing to refuse sex across the two-year period from age 19.5 to 21.5. Women in the moderate trajectory started about 10% lower than women in the confident trajectory and became less willing to refuse sex over the following two years. Finally, women in the reluctant trajectory showed more volatility in their willingness to refuse sex compared to the other groups. They started lower than confident and moderate women, dropped closer to “not willing at all” when they were about 20.5 and then increased in their willingness to refuse sex by 21.5.

Note: The authors analyzed responses to the following question: “Imagine being with a partner who wants to have sex, but you do not. How willing would you be to refuse to have sex with your partner, even if it made him angry?” Please give me a number between zero and five, where zero means “not at all willing” and five means “extremely willing.” (Although the scale ranged from 0 to 5, numbers 1-4 were not assigned a specific verbal definition.)

RAPE MYTHS

Rape myths were assessed with the following statements, to which respondents were asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed.

- ▶ When women go out in sexy clothes, they are just asking for trouble.
- ▶ If a woman is with a guy and things go too far, then it isn't rape even if she says no.
- ▶ There is a point when a guy gets so aroused, or turned on, he just can't stop himself.
- ▶ When a woman says she was raped, she probably agreed to have sex and then changed her mind.
- ▶ No woman—no matter how she dresses or behaves—deserves to be raped. (Respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement were coded as accepting a rape myth.)

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policy interventions are needed to help young women improve their sense of sexual autonomy and agency. For example, comprehensive sexual education classes should be introduced where they currently do not exist and strengthened where they do. These classes should educate young women (and men) about how to refuse sex and how to advocate for one's own sexual desires. In addition, these and other efforts—such as bystander intervention training—should work to dispel rape myths throughout all facets of society.

Socially disadvantaged and African-American women, women who had a birth in their teens, those with an early sexual debut, and women who believe in rape myths would especially benefit from interventions that identify the perceived barriers to refusing sex and help women develop safe and effective strategies that strengthen their willingness to do so.

REFERENCE

¹Weitzman, A. & Mallory, A.B. (2019). Racial, socioeconomic, and attitudinal disparities in trajectories of young women's willingness to refuse unwanted sex. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 64(6): 746-752.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Abigail Weitzman \(aweitzman@utexas.edu\)](mailto:aweitzman@utexas.edu) is an assistant professor of sociology and a faculty research associate in the Population Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. [Allen B. Mallory](#) is a PhD student in the department of Human Development and Family Science and a PRC graduate student trainee.

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