

## Sexual Violence: Are Women Victims or Responsible?

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Doi: [10.19044/esipreprint.5.2023.p270](https://doi.org/10.19044/esipreprint.5.2023.p270)

Approved: 20 May 2023

Posted: 25 May 2023

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*Cite As:*

Ostuni A., Sacco G., Sacco P. & Zizza A.(2023). *Sexual Violence: Are Women Victims or Responsible?* ESI Preprints. <https://doi.org/10.19044/esipreprint.5.2023.p270>

### Abstract

Sexual violence is the imposition of an unwanted physical contact obtained by force, manipulation, or coercion. This kind of violence, which is detrimental to the dignity of the person who suffers it, causes deep psychic as well as physical wounds in the victim and is the most widespread violation of human rights in all countries and cultures. This paper tries to investigate whether the stereotype of women being responsible for the sexual violence they suffered is dominant in our society. The study of this stereotype has been addressed through the survey "Gender roles stereotypes and the social image of sexual violence" carried out by ISTAT in 2019 (referred to 2018) on the adult, male and female, population aged between 18 and 74. With regard to the stereotypes proposed in the survey, the results have shown that there is a clear contrast between young and older women and between women with a higher educational qualification and those with an elementary school degree. At the regional level, however, the contrast is between Central-Northern regions and Southern Italy: in five of the eight regions belonging to the southern division the most widespread stereotype is that the responsibility for sexual violence is attributable to women.

**Keywords:** Italian, sexual violence, stereotype

## Introduction

The basis for combating violence against women is laid down in the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe. This convention, founded in 2011, aims to eliminate this serious form of human rights violation through three objectives: preventing violence, protecting victims, and prosecuting their aggressors.

Violence against women can take on many nuances. It usually materializes in acts that cause physical, sexual, psychological, or economic suffering. In this regard, this paper tries to find out whether the cliché "*Women are responsible for the sexual violence they suffered*" is rooted in our society.

Writing this paper has been possible due to an initiative carried out by a small town belonging to the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, namely Cividale del Friuli in the province of Udine. The government of this town produced an anti-rape pamphlet which was distributed to the local high school girls. This pamphlet was promptly withdrawn from circulation, thus causing considerable controversy. It contained a series of recommendations (e.g.: avoiding too short clothes, avoiding provocative smiles to strangers, etc.) aimed at avoiding the risk of being harassed.

The immediate reactional questions are: 1. Is sexual violence fought by educating victims on how to defend themselves or teaching the aggressor about affectivity and respect for women? 2. Did the anti-rape pamphlet distributed by the municipality in Friuli legitimized the "wrong" behaviour of women? To give an answer to these questions we used, as previously said, a survey carried out by Istat in November 2019. It was published on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and within a collaboration agreement with the Department for Equal Opportunities at the Presidency of the Council and contains the data of the survey concerning the stereotypes about gender roles and sexual violence.<sup>1</sup>

For the first time, in addition to the detection of the stereotypes on traditional gender roles, the survey, which concerned individuals aged 18 to 74, considered opinions on the acceptability of violence, on its spread and causes, as well as on the stereotypes about sexual violence.

Stereotypes regarding traditional gender roles have already been covered in a previous work (Ostuni A., Sacco G., Sacco P., Zizza A., 2022), therefore in this paper the analysis will be focused on sexual violence against women.

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<sup>1</sup> Istat: "Gender roles stereotypes and the social image of sexual violence". The sample of the survey "Gender stereotypes and the social image of sexual violence" is defined as a sub-sample of the sample responding to the survey about the Labour Force in the period June - November 2018.

The statements submitted to the respondents concerned sexual violence in seven of its forms, namely:

- 1) *women can provoke sexual violence because of their outfit;*
- 2) *women who do not want a sexual intercourse are able to avoid it;*
- 3) *serious women are not raped;*
- 4) *if a husband/partner forces his wife/partner to have sex against her will, it is not violence;*
- 5) *when faced with a sexual proposal, women often say no but actually mean yes;*
- 6) *if a woman is sexually abused while drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is at least partly responsible;*
- 7) *allegations of sexual violence are often false.*

The answer possibilities were: "I totally agree", "I fairly agree", "I partially disagree", "I totally disagree", "no answer". In this regard, attention was focused on the response "I totally disagree" that highlights the firm and clear opposition to the stereotype on the possible cause of sexual violence inserted in the statement made. Moreover, the analysis was focused on the answers given only by the female population, mainly to acquire this population's point of view on sexual violence, understand if they feel victims or responsible for the occurred violence and therefore understand if these stereotypes are also well established among the female population. This specific analysis was done because, as it has already been pointed out, in our society the misconception or prejudice which accuses women of being responsible for the sexual violence they suffered is still present.

### **Methodology and data**

To examine the data of the survey "*Gender stereotypes and the social image of sexual violence*"<sup>2</sup> and the answers of the female population about the statements concerning above all sexual violence the cluster analysis technique was applied at the regional level.<sup>3</sup>

The objective was to create groups of regions, homogeneous within them and heterogeneous between them, to identify and classify them according to the degree of tolerance towards the stereotypes submitted to the respondents.

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<sup>2</sup> Istat: <http://dati-violenzadonne.istat.it/>

<sup>3</sup> The method used to measure the distances between cases (regions) is the squared Euclidean distance. For the formation of clusters, the hierarchical criterion with agglomerative grouping was adopted, using Ward's algorithm (1963). As for the related methodological insights see, for instance, Delvecchio (2010), Lis and Sambin (1977).

## 1 - Stereotypes based on age and educational qualification

Women's clothing has always been a subject of discussions and judgments, sometimes even extreme; therefore, questions like the following ones are still very common: "Are women responsible for the sexual violence they suffered because what they were wearing was sexy or too daring?" "Can a short skirt justify a sexual abuse?" "Is it fair to suggest a dress code, thus limiting women's freedom and personality, as perhaps the anti-rape pamphlet distributed by the above-mentioned municipality of Friuli intended to do? Unfortunately, in different areas and contexts, the discrimination against female sex reaches radical positions due to what women are wearing. On the one hand there are prejudices against clothes that are considered too daring and therefore not very decorous. On the other, the reasons are linked to religious, moral, and social rules that some governments impose against certain types of clothing.

Considering the respondents' answers to the statement "*Women can provoke sexual violence because of their outfit*", 52.1% of women nationwide disagree with this bias. A much higher percentage of rejection of this stereotype was expected, because these values could confirm that even women think that too daring clothes can legitimize and justify aggressors' actions.

Can women avoid a forced sexual intercourse if they really don't want to have it? Can one escape sexual violence? At national level, the answers percentages disagreeing with the statement "*Women who do not want a sexual intercourse are able to avoid it*" are very low (30.1%). It is surprising that a very high percentage of the interviewees think that women could avoid sexual assault if they wanted to. Unfortunately, in this case, the low response rate negatively affects the prejudice that blames women for the sexual violence they suffered. Consequently, a question about the sexual violence against women that is frequently seen in our society remains unanswered: "On the basis of the answers given by the women interviewed, is sexual violence avoidable?"

People still wonder whether dressing inconspicuously but elegantly, measuring smiles, and implementing absent behaviours of frivolity and superficiality are requirements that can ward off sexual violence. 82.8% of the female population interviewed nationwide disagree with the stereotype "*Serious women are not raped*" which means that 17% of the same female population believes that a serious women do not risk exposure to sexual violence.

The crime of sexual violence, in particular if a husband forces his wife to have sex against her will, is included in the Italian Penal Code; it is therefore punishable when the evidence of guilt is certain. Unfortunately, women need more time to be aware of their right to independence and to

understand what violent acts against them are. As for the statement “*If a husband/partner forces his wife/partner to have sex against her will, it is not violence*”, 89% of the female interviewees believe that if a husband or partner obliges them to have an unwanted sexual intercourse, he commits violence. Consequently, almost 20% of the Italian women interviewed consider violence as acceptable and normal in a couple relationship, thus justifying their husbands or partners when they claim an unwanted sexual intercourse.

Some people sometimes wonder whether the resistance that women offer to a sexual proposal is true as their ambiguous reaction shows they are actually willing to do it. As regards the statement “*When faced with a sexual proposal, women often say no but actually mean yes*”, 72.3% of the Italian female population interviewed reject the hypothesis of an ambiguous behaviour when faced with a sexual proposal, which means that the majority of them cannot conceive the idea of a woman accepting a violent sexual proposal. However, it is puzzling that the remaining minority of women interviewed would accept a violent sexual proposal even if only apparently displeased.

Another contradictory question is whether a woman should be held jointly responsible for the violence suffered if she was under the influence of alcohol or drugs. With reference to the statement “*If a woman is sexually abused while drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is at least partly responsible*”, the disagreement of the female population nationally interviewed reaches 66.9%. This means that about 30% of the female population holds women responsible for the violence they have suffered.

In Italian society there is persistent uncertainty about the credibility of the victims of sexual abuse, because the accusations made by the victims are often considered false. For this reason, the defence of the possible rapist is very often based on the fact that the woman who suffered violence was actually consenting, but as she later regretted the occasional sexual intercourse, she is only trying to get financial compensation from the defendant.

As a result, another question posed by the investigation carried out by Istat aimed to verify how true are considered the accusations that women make against their rapists. As for the statement “*Allegations of sexual violence are often false*”, the shocking finding was that only 53.1% of the female population interviewed in Italy disagreed with the above-mentioned stereotype.

Fortunately, the female answers regarding the statements of the survey differ according to age and level of education. Both characteristics differ in a coherent way, because the percentages of disagreement with the stereotypes proposed decrease with the increase of the interviewees' age: the

level of disagreement of the young generations (18-29 years) is greater than the one belonging to elderly women (60-74 age group). Moreover, the percentages of disagreement with the stereotypes presented to women with low or elementary education or without any qualifications are all lower than the percentages shown by women having a higher level of education, i.e. a high school diploma or a university degree (Tables 1 and 2).

It is undoubtedly positive that young women see the stereotypes about sexual violence differently from older women. In order to increase even more the percentages counted among young women, the objective must always be to combat the discrimination and the stereotypes related to gender roles and sexism, as they inevitably lead to male violence against women.

**Table 1 - Stereotype spread by age**

Stereotype	Age group				Total
	18-29	30-44	45-59	60-74	
1) Women can provoke sexual violence because of their outfit	65.3	59.7	51.5	36.5	52.1
2) Women who do not want a sexual intercourse are able to avoid it	32.3	33.3	30.7	24.4	30.1
3) Serious women are not raped	83.9	88.4	83.0	76.1	82.8
4) If a husband/partner forces his wife/partner to have sex against her will, it is not violence	91.5	91.5	90.0	83.5	89.0
5) When faced with a sexual proposal, women often say no but actually mean yes	79.2	78.5	73.7	59.7	72.3
6) If a woman is sexually abused while drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is at least partly responsible	70.4	70.4	70.3	56.6	66.9
7) Allegations of sexual violence are often false	56.8	56.8	54.4	45.3	53.1

Source: Istat

In this regard, maximum attention must be paid to the training of the new generations, through campaigns of prevention, correct information, and awareness-raising, so that both women and men can be aware of their roles and respect each other's identity differences. Everyone should be taught diversity, acceptance, sharing and women's rights since childhood, because preventing violence means fighting its cultural roots and causes.

**Table 2 - Stereotype spread by educational degree**

Stereotype	Elementary or no degree	Middle School degree	High school degree	University degree or diploma	Total
	1) Women can provoke sexual violence because of their outfit	29.0	44.8	57.0	70.0
2) Women who do not want a sexual intercourse are able to avoid it	19.9	26.2	31.6	40.4	30.1

3) Serious women are not raped	65.7	81.0	86.3	89.9	82.8
4) If a husband/partner forces his wife/partner to have sex against her will, it is not violence	77.3	87.0	92.0	94.0	89.0
5) When faced with a sexual proposal, women often say no but actually mean yes	49.4	69.3	76.8	83.5	72.3
6) If a woman is sexually abused while drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is at least partly responsible	48.1	62.4	71.0	78.9	66.9
7) Allegations of sexual violence are often false	41.3	51.0	55.3	60.3	53.1

Source: Istat

## 2 - The spread of stereotypes by region

To understand the extent of the spread of the proposed stereotypes among women according to the regions they belong to (Table 3), through the indicator “*I totally disagree*” regarding the seven statements included in the Istat survey, the cluster analysis technique was applied, as it helped obtain a homogeneous classification of the regions. The application of the same technique produced four groups (clusters) of homogeneous regions within them (Table 4).

Table 3 – Stereotype spread by region

Regions	Statements percentage						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Piedmont	52.2	36.3	84.2	91.3	73.4	67.8	53.2
Valle d'Aosta	44.6	29.8	81.7	86.9	72.9	68.4	51.7
Lombardy	54.0	32.8	86.1	90.5	73.4	70.6	54.4
Trentino-Alto Adige	46.1	29.1	79.0	88.5	69.3	64.6	47.0
Veneto	50.6	30.5	81.2	88.6	71.6	66.1	53.7
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	49.9	31.2	87.3	87.6	74.7	65.6	53.3
Liguria	59.5	32.4	88.5	92.2	79.3	73.3	49.1
Emilia-Romagna	57.2	38.3	85.7	93.3	77.7	70.2	59.2
Tuscany	60.3	32.3	82.9	91.3	76.8	67.6	53.7
Umbria	62.6	27.8	82.1	90.5	78.1	71.7	45.5
Marche	46.7	28.8	78.8	86.2	66.1	62.0	52.2
Lazio	58.1	34.1	87.4	91.5	76.3	72.4	53.8
Abruzzo	48.9	26.3	79.9	85.0	70.6	67.7	47.8
Molise	46.3	28.1	80.0	83.3	72.9	73.3	50.3
Campania	44.9	21.1	78.9	86.9	65.3	61.3	53.8
Apulia	48.2	26.5	81.0	87.1	74.4	63.4	56.4
Basilicata	44.7	24.9	73.2	87.5	67.2	64.1	46.2
Calabria	45.5	29.4	77.6	81.0	63.4	56.6	46.1
Sicily	44.1	20.3	76.7	84.8	66.1	59.5	50.9
Sardinia	63.0	31.5	86.4	88.7	75.5	77.2	48.5
Italy	52.1	30.1	82.8	89.0	72.3	66.9	53.1

Source: Istat

(1) Women can provoke sexual violence because of their outfit;

- (2) *Women who do not want sexual intercourse are able to avoid it;*
- (3) *Serious women are not raped;*
- (4) *If a husband/partner forces his wife/partner to have sex against her will, it is not violence;*
- (5) *When faced with sexual proposal women often say no but actually mean yes;*
- (6) *If a woman is sexually abused while drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is at least partly responsible;*
- (7) *Allegations of sexual violence are often false.*

By examining the groups, it can be inferred that the beliefs of women belonging to the regions included in cluster 2 (Sardinia, Umbria and Liguria) are less adherent to stereotypes, as in this cluster average values, higher than in the other groups and the Italian one, are found in the statements “*Women can provoke sexual violence because of their outfit*” (61.7%), “*Serious women are not raped*” (85.7%), “*When faced with a sexual proposal, women often say no but actually mean yes*” (77.6%) and “*If a woman is sexually abused while drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is at least partly responsible*” (74.1%). The same trend is present in cluster 1 (Lazio, Lombardy, Piedmont, Tuscany, and Emilia-Romagna) for the remaining statements: “*Women who do not want a sexual intercourse are able to avoid it*” (34.8%), “*If a husband/partner forces his wife/partner to have sex against her will, it is not violence*”, (91.6%), “*Allegations of sexual violence are often false*” (54.9%). It is evident that the highest rate of rejection of the administered stereotypes belongs to women living in the central and northern regions of Italy with the sole exception of Sardinia.

Contrarily, the regions in which women present more stereotypical beliefs are included in cluster 4 (Campania, Sicily, Abruzzo, Trentino-Alto Adige, Marche, Basilicata, and Calabria). In this cluster six statements obtained a lower average value level compared to both the other groups’ and the national ones, namely “*Women can provoke sexual violence because of their outfit*” (45.8%), “*Women who do not want a sexual intercourse are able to avoid it*” (25.7%), “*Serious women are not raped*” (77.7%), “*If a husband/partner forces his wife/partner to have sex against her will, it is not violence*” (85.7%), “*When faced with a sexual proposal, women often say no but actually mean yes*” (66.9%), “*If a woman is sexually abused while drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is at least partly responsible*” (62.3%). The geographical situation changes: cluster 4 includes five regions belonging to the South Italy (including Sicily) where there is widespread prejudice that the responsibility for sexual violence is attributable to women.

**Table 4** – Average values per cluster

Stereotype	Cluste	Cluste	Cluste	Cluste	Italy
	r	r	r	r	
	1	2	3	4	
1) Women can provoke sexual violence because of their outfit	56.4	<b>61.7</b>	47.9	<b>45.8</b>	52.1
2) Women who do not want a sexual intercourse are able to avoid it	<b>34.8</b>	30.6	29.2	<b>25.7</b>	30.1
3) Serious women are not raped	85.3	<b>85.7</b>	82.2	<b>77.7</b>	82.8
4) If a husband/partner forces his wife/partner to have sex against her will, it is not violence	<b>91.6</b>	90.5	86.7	<b>85.7</b>	89.0
5) When faced with a sexual proposal, women often say no but actually mean yes	75.5	<b>77.6</b>	73.3	<b>66.9</b>	72.3
6) If a woman is sexually abused while drunk or under the influence of drugs, she is at least partly responsible	69.7	<b>74.1</b>	67.4	<b>62.3</b>	66.9
7) Allegations of sexual violence are often false	<b>54.9</b>	<b>47.7</b>	53.1	49.1	53.1
<b>Regions total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>20</b>

The regions included in the clusters are:

Cluster 1: Lazio, Lombardy, Piedmont, Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna

Cluster 2: Sardinia, Umbria, Liguria

Cluster 3: Veneto, Valle d'Aosta, Apulia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Molise

Cluster 4: Campania, Sicily, Abruzzo, Trentino-Alto Adige, Marche, Basilicata, Calabria

## Conclusion

There are many reasons used to justify sexual violence against women, but the most recurring misconceptions are considering women as if they were objects, and seeing them provocative in their outfits, thus feeling entitled to abuse them, and justifying rapists because of their biological instincts.

The anti-rape pamphlet distributed by a small town in Friuli to high school girls could be considered as a sort of “rape legitimization”, as it helps confirm the thesis that women should necessarily avoid occasions that may prove dangerous, otherwise they can be also liable for a possible sexual violence.

People wonder whether it is true that a man meeting a woman who behaves frivolously, wears skimpy clothes or is not able to assess the surrounding reality due to drug or alcohol abuse, cannot refrain from committing sexual violence. Even men have their stereotype: they have an irrepressible instinct which women must guard against. Therefore, back to the anti-rape pamphlet, it seems easier to educate a girl than a rapist.

Undoubtedly times change and everything can change as well. The progressive evolution of social habits and customs amplifies young people’s needs and above all their desire to have fun, but without receiving suggestions of any limitation of freedom and expression of their personality that date back to a long time ago.

Maybe, a pamphlet should also have been distributed to boys to make them realize that they cannot demand sexual intercourses without a manifest will of the partner. Prevention is the aim to bet on. Children should be educated on women's rights, gender stereotypes and sexism from an early age, thus strengthening the family and school systems, whose purpose must be to improve both the training of school staff and the educational offer. Children ought to learn affectivity and gender equality. Communication and advertising messages regarding gender stereotypes and sexism should be limited and the re-education of men who committed sexual violence ought to be fostered.

Cultural changes are needed to promote the culture of respect and put an end to the serious and widespread violation of human rights. It is a priority for an advanced and avant-garde society to condemn obstacles to equality and to promote the emergence of a culture based on respect, inclusion, equity, and equality. "Actually, the phenomenon of sexual violence against women is transversal since it affects all the cultures, societies, and social classes in the world, as well as our daily life. This kind of violence is still underestimated because of a culture that has legitimized the male role of power and control over women for centuries" (G. Sacco, 2006).

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