

What is Marital Rape?

Marital rape is one of the most common forms of domestic and intimate partner violence in the world. This can be stated as an abuse of power by which one partner tries to establish dominion over the other. In a country like Pakistan, where the mere subject of rape is considered taboo, it is a major tool used to oppress a majority of women.

This type of rape refers to forced sexual acts by one's spouse, or former spouse, without the other's consent. Such acts include sexual intercourse, anal or oral sex, forced sexual behavior with other individuals, and any other sexual acts that the victim considers to be demeaning, painful and degrading. Other names for this type of rape include spousal rape or intimate rape.

One of the basic differences between stranger rape and marital rape is that the former involves a person the victim does not personally know, and shares no history with. While rape is, in itself, a deeply traumatic event; in marital rape, the circumstances are very different from stranger rape. Here, aside from the physical and sexual violation; it is, quite simply, a betrayal of trust.

Myths about Marital Rape

Marital rape continues to be one of the most controversial topics in the world today; making it difficult to identify and even harder to report. This is because, regardless of geographical location, religion, or economic/social progress; people continue to believe in age old cultural and traditional practices.

1. In some cultures, conjugal rights are mostly given to the male. Women are considered to "give up" their rights to their husband after matrimony, thus becoming his property. How can a man hurt his own "property"? Still others feel that wives give up their rights to consent after marriage, making sexual intercourse with their spouse a "marital duty" rather than an individual choice of free will.
2. Concerns regarding marital rape laws also play a part in keeping spousal rape in the shadows. Some believe that such laws would make reconciliation in marriages impossible; while others feel that the legal system will be bogged down by a large number of cases that would be impossible to prove and prosecute, thus wasting the court's "precious time".

3. Common theories abound that marital rape is not as physically and emotionally damaging as other forms of violence (such as stranger rape), reducing its importance in the eyes of most members of society.
4. There is also the fear that should marital rape laws become applicable, women will destroy their husband's lives out of revenge or for their own personal gain.
5. In many cultures, girls are taught from a young age to be "good wives". Since this notion is fed into them since their birth, women and girls don't realize that they *have* the right to say no. That their consent matters at all.

These are just some of the most common myths surrounding the act of marital rape in most societies. Such beliefs make it nigh impossible for justice to be served; as, in most cases, the victim is advised to remain silent about the issue. Ignoring domestic violence and hoping the abuse will stop at some point, is not the answer.

Identifying Marital Rape

Marriage is considered a sacred bond between two people, built on love and trust. In most societies, it is the foundation upon which families are built. It is not surprising that the concept of marital rape is therefore so shocking.

The thought of being a possible of victim can be extremely repulsive, causing most women to turn away from the obvious signs of abuse they face; giving it excuses such as "rough love" and "he was just angry" etc. The truth, however, is far uglier. This is why marital rape is so destructive; because it betrays the fundamental basis of the intimate relationship you share with your partner; a person with whom you share a history, whom who thought you knew intimately, with whom you have a home and maybe even children.

Marital rape is a very common scenario in most households. Turning one's face away from the obvious signs will not make it go away. Domestic violence cannot be ignored. It must be faced in order to be stopped, fought and eventually cured.

Here are some questions a woman can ask herself in order to identity whether or not marital rape is an element in her marriage:

1. Have I been forced to have sex by my spouse when I did not want to?
2. Have I ever been restrained against my wishes during sex by my partner?
3. Have I ever been physically hurt by my spouse during sex?

4. Have I ever felt extremely uncomfortable with my partners requests during sex, but complied anyway?
5. Have I ever been afraid to say “no” to my spouse and had sex because of fear or guilt?
6. Have I ever felt sexually harassed by my partner and given into sex because of the constant harassment?

Types of Marital Rape

Marital rape is generally sub-divided into three categories. This is not to say that other forms of rape do not occur within the bounds of marriage.

Violent Rape: this takes place when the abuser uses enough to force to physically injure or hurt the victim, apart from any injuries which might occur due to the rape itself (for example injuries to the genital area). Here, violence can be a part of the rape or the rape can be a part of the violence itself, which might be a frequent occurrence in the marriage. Many abusers will also force their partners to submit to sexual acts in order to prove her forgiveness or to further humiliate her.

“Force-only” Rape: here, the abuser only uses enough force to control or hold his wife in position. This form of rape usually takes place when there is a difference in the physical size and strength of the husband and wife, allowing the husband to easily overpower his spouse. An example of such force can include holding down the victim by her wrists in order to prevent her from escaping. This form of rape also takes place in abusive relationships, where emotional abuse is more common and physical abuse is infrequent. Here, coercion plays a large role in emotionally subduing the woman; she might even be so numb from the constant emotional abuse that she may not know how to react when the sex is forced on her.

Sadistic Rape: Sadism is the tendency to derive pleasure, especially sexual gratification, by giving pain to or humiliating another person. Sadism in (marital) rape means that, in addition to the rape itself, the victim is forced to perform acts aimed at humiliating and degrading her. Such acts could include the abuser acting out a fantasy of torture, urinating on the victim, or using another object during the rape.

Consequences of Marital Rape

Do not ever believe the myth that marital rape is “not as bad” as stranger rape. There are damaging consequences for all victims of rape, whether inside the bonds of matrimony or out of it.

Survivors of marital rape usually live with their tormentor in silence, for fear of social stigma and/or financial hardship. However, the emotional cost of that silence is, in most cases, too much to bear.

Physically, most survivors of marital rape suffer from sexual dysfunction, eating disorders, bladder infections, miscarriages, infertility, sexually transmitted diseases, vaginal disorders, bruising and other wounds.

Emotionally, marital rape survivors may have flashbacks, a severe inability to trust, depression and may suffer from traumatic stress disorder.

Marital Rape: A Crime

Marital rape *is a crime*. Under the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), this is a punishable offense.

When two people get married, it is in the hope that they will provide support to each other and create a family within the boundaries of mutual love and respect. Marital rape shatters that hope and destroys that foundation of trust which supports their dreams for a happy future.

If you, or anyone you know, suffers – or has suffered – from marital rape, be sure to reach out and get help. There are many NGOs and organizations working to help survivors of domestic violence across Pakistan.

Remember, your consent matters. You have the right to say no.