

Uncovering Sexual Abuse in Marriage



by DARBY STRICKLAND

When God created marriage he already had in his mind how it would one day be a picture of Christ and his church. He intended it to capture beautiful relational realities of tenderness, oneness, and selfless love. He fashioned our hearts and bodies to become one on every level with our spouse—emotionally, spiritually, and physically. In Genesis, when God says the man shall “hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh,” he is calling husbands and wives to unite every aspect of their being. God designed our physical relationship to be an expression of our emotional and spiritual intimacy. But even more than that, our love for one another is meant to be a picture of how Jesus loves us, his church. Jesus’ love is patient, kind, faithful, sacrificing, accepting, honoring, honest, and caring. By God’s design, this way of loving should characterize the marriage relationship—including a couple’s sexual intimacy.

Sadly, as we look at sexual abuse in marriage, we are going to encounter something very different. We will see sex corrupted by those lusting to fulfill their own desires at any cost. In too many marriages, sex is not a picture of loving mutuality and intimacy but is tainted by domination and manipulation. When a husband is sexually oppressive, it is difficult to even imagine what is taking place. But too many wives are suffering. We must turn our attention

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to them and learn how God calls us to minister.¹

When I began counseling, I was not even aware that marital sexual abuse was something I should be alert to. Now that I see its prevalence, I am deeply concerned that many in the church remain unaware that it even occurs in Christian marriages. I want to do what I can to change this. I want to help friends, counselors, and pastors recognize and uncover when abuse is taking place, as well as offer some guidance on how to respond when abuse is revealed. To do this, we will cover many topics. We will define the issue, hear from some women who have been violated in this way, and review some sobering statistics. We will examine why this abuse is so often hidden. We will then describe the heart of an abuser and discuss specific patterns of marital sexual abuse. Finally, I will provide two sets of questions to assist with disclosure and in counseling conversations, along with a number of ways to provide help.

Marital Sexual Abuse: A Definition

Marital sexual abuse is a broad term that can encompass many heinous and exploitive acts. The worst violations occur when sex is demanded, required, or taken by force, as in instances of rape or forced sex acts. Other abusive acts include the *unwanted* intrusion of pornography or implements in sex, undesired sexual activities, peeking, or spying. Sex abuse can be manipulative and coercive. In such instances, the oppressor uses unrelenting pressure or threats to leverage a sexual encounter even after the victim expresses discomfort or refusal.

Here are a few poignant stories that show some of the varied ways partners violate their spouses:

- Tina: “My husband never seems to be satisfied. He always wants sex. I feel guilty all the time. He tells me on the few days that we do not have sex that it is my fault if he looks at porn, so sometimes I will give in just to protect him from sinning. Other nights he will wake me up in the middle of the night and beg me for sex. I do it but I am just so tired it is hard to enjoy—so then he gets upset with me that I did not enjoy it enough. Morning comes and he insists that we try again. It is

¹ The focus of this article is on wives as victims of sexual abuse in marriage. However, in less significant numbers, husbands can also be victims of marital sexual abuse.

important to him that I show lots of excitement. But I am exhausted. I am not sure if there is something wrong with me.”

- Rose: “My husband will not show me any affection unless he knows it will culminate in sex. If I reach out to hold his hand, he says ‘you know what this means.’ He tells me that he cannot help but be turned on by any physical touch and that it is my job to finish what I start. But there are so many times I wish I could just be close to him without it leading to sex. I honestly do not know what to do. He refuses to listen to me when I try to talk to him about it.”
- Susan: “I have woken up in the middle of the night with my husband on top of me. I do not remember initiating sex, but he tells me I did. Do you think it is possible that I wouldn’t remember that?”
- Janet: “One day on our honeymoon, I just wanted to go out and have a nice dinner and relax. When we got back, I wanted to talk and cuddle. My new husband kept advancing physically and I kept putting him off in a playful way. I do not understand what happened next. All of a sudden, he got this odd look in his eye and said, ‘You cannot disrespect and reject me. I cannot stand for our marriage to start off like this.’ The next thing I know he had pinned me down and was physically forcing himself on me. I could tell he was angry. I was terrified so I did not resist. I had never seen him like that before. To this day, I cannot understand how he could do that to me while I was crying. Did he not care he was scaring and hurting me?”
- Sally: “My husband tells me I need to loosen up and that sex with me is boring. He says ever since I gave birth he is no longer turned on by me, that ‘if I loved him I would work harder to spice it up and stay sexy.’ I have bought lingerie and tried new things, even went on a strict diet, but he is never happy. He thinks I should get work done on my breasts to make them better for him. A few weeks ago, he started showing me porn clips and asked me to re-enact things with him. I tried but it made me feel dirty and some were painful. I tried to tell him that this stuff is not God honoring, but he said, ‘You are a prude. God gave me the most frigid, unloving wife on the planet. And if you are not careful I will leave you for someone who knows

how to love me and fulfill their duty with joy.’ Should I make myself do these things with him to keep him happy? I do not know what I’d do with our four kids if he left.”

- Jen: “If I refuse to be intimate with Bob, the next day he is rotten to the kids. He becomes so irritable and loud, even our dog cowers. I try to interject and tell him to not be so harsh and punishing. He just barks at me, ‘if you want me to be in a good mood it is your job to put me in one.’ One time after my gallbladder surgery we had not had sex in two weeks, and when I went to check out at the grocery store there was no money on our bank card. Later he told me I had been neglecting him and I needed to know what it was like to not get what I needed.”

These are glimpses into the dark world of sex abuse in marriage. They are stories of Christian women married to Christian men² in believing Christian churches. But these stories largely remain untold.

Hidden Realities

Marital sexual abuse often remains hidden, so we need to be alert to its existence. Statistics can help to open our eyes to patterns, ask better questions, and be less blind to the sin around us.

Statistics reveal that sexual assault or forced sex occurs in approximately 40–45% of relationships³ when there has been verbal or physical violence in the marriage. Marital rape occurs in 10–14% of marriages.⁴ These numbers should alarm us. And they should also cause us to ask: With this level of prevalence, why do we not hear more about it?

We do not hear more about it because many of the victims remain silent. Women often do not reveal it—even in counseling. There are many reasons

² Here I am talking about men who profess Christianity though only God knows their hearts.

³ Campbell, J.C., and K. Soeken, “Forced Sex and Intimate Partner Violence: Effects on Women’s Risk and Women’s Health,” *Violence Against Women* 5(2) (July 1999): 1017–35.

⁴ “The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report,” National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 2011, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf.

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