



Understanding what sexual assault actually does to women — and standing up for those impacted

Illustration by Andrea Levy, Advance Local

Commentary from the community: *As a social scientist, I study the psychology of sex roles ... but I was missing the deep psychological pain of real people.*

Richard M. Perloff

We recoil at the stories of Jeffrey Epstein's sexual abuse of young girls, and the many men in America's leadership class who knew what he had done and hung out with him anyway. We gasp when we read about the Uber scandal, the revelations that Uber received a report of sexual misconduct or sexual assault on an average of nearly every eight minutes between 2017 and 2022 in the United States.

But we tell ourselves it happens to others, the rich and famous, the unfortunate few. Except that's not true. An astounding one in five women in the United States have experienced a rape or sexual assault during their lifetime.

As a social scientist who studies the psychology of sex roles, I found these issues important. But until recently, it was abstract and impersonal. I was missing the deep psychological pain of real people, like Moirah Schiewe, who felt paralyzed — she couldn't move her muscles and couldn't raise her voice to scream — during a rape at DePaul

An astounding one in five women in the United States have experienced a rape or sexual assault during their lifetime.

University. As I read her account and many others in writer Jen Percy's recent book, "Girls Play Dead," on this topic, I felt myself immersed in a wrenching new recognition that sexual assault frequently causes women to experience a catatonic state of freezing or tonic immobility.

Curious and concerned about these issues, I contacted a Cleveland State colleague, Ph.D. sociologist Rachel Lovell, who has been involved in research on untested sexual assault kits and rape, a searing problem first revealed by The Plain Dealer in 2013. Lovell's work documented yet another jaw-dropping indicator of brute cruelty: instances of nonfatal strangulation experienced by women during rapes in Cleveland and elsewhere.

Yet sexual violence does not make it to the list of problems Americans regard as most

important. This is my *cri de coeur*, an effort to draw attention to aspects of the problem well-known to activists and researchers, but less appreciated by the public.

Freezing, called tonic immobility, is a hard-wired, survival response to threat when muscles go stiff and fear blocks the neural circuits that promote action control, leading to a state of involuntary immobility. As many as 70% of sexual assault victims experience tonic immobility, according to one study of survivors.

As a result, many rape survivors cannot offer a consistent narrative of what happened during the assault, putting them at the mercy of jurors who erroneously believe that the failure of women to resist is evidence of consent — a belief that is preposterous, given that the very incapacitation of the nervous system makes such resistance

physically and psychologically impossible.

Then there's nonfatal strangulation. According to recent research by Lovell and others, more than 16% of women aged 18 and older in the United States report they have been nonconsensually strangled, their necks choked, squeezed and constricted by an intimate partner, sometimes during rape and in some cases as many as 10 times. Yes, you read that statistic correctly. Nonfatal strangulation can cause loss of consciousness and even brain damage.

We need to address these problems. Police need to implement better programs in trauma-informed training so they can more readily recognize that a victim's inability to resist does not mean that she consented to sexual assault.

Officers need to ask rape victims more sensitive questions in cases of nonfatal strangulation to make a stronger legal case that documents that strangulation actually occurred.

And most importantly, women and men in particular must understand the psychological trauma sexual assault unleashes to help move the public to a more empathic appreciation of the physical and psychological effects of sexual violence that no woman should ever experience.

How many more tragic, heart-rending stories must we read before we as a society make amends to women?

Perloff is a distinguished professor of communication and psychology at Cleveland State University.