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The Dating Study: Men's Opinions about Dating Relationships with Women

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Summary of Results

Study Title: *The Dating Study: Men's Opinions about Dating Relationships with Women*

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This summary includes some sensitive and sexually explicit information.

Heterosexual men aged 18–25 participated in focus group discussions to help us understand how men talk with one another about dating, relationships, sex, and sexual violence and assault. Any sexual activity—from unwanted touching to intercourse—that occurs without mutual consent is sexual assault and is against the law in Canada. Many young adults experience sexual assault, which can lead to a range of negative mental and physical health consequences. But sexual violence is a lot more than just assault or rape—it includes harassment, sexist jokes, and other behaviours and language that contribute to a culture that condones and supports sexual harm against women and people of other genders.

Sexual violence and assault are *gendered*. This means two things. First, proportionally most victims of sexual assault are women, and women and transgender individuals are at higher risk of being sexually victimized than men. But sexual assault can happen to anyone—women, men, as well as people who are transgender, gender fluid, or gender non-conforming. Second, most of those who commit sexual assault are men, though women and transgender people do sometimes commit sexual assault. It is important to understand that, while most perpetrators of sexual assault are men, most men are NOT sexual assault perpetrators; most men seek consent in sexual relationships and are uncomfortable with language and behaviour that objectifies and hurts women or people of other genders. However, some men might find it challenging to speak out when they hear language that objectifies and hurts women or might (unknowingly) use language that can objectify and hurt women when talking to other men, despite not personally holding these beliefs. This study has helped us understand some of these challenges, as well as the ways that men speak out against objectifying and hurtful language when talking with other men.

We found that many participants in this study drew on negative myths and stereotypes about men, women, sex, and dating during the focus group discussions:

- When talking about how sex is initiated, participants often explained that it *just happens*, that *one thing leads to another*, or that *clothes just start flying off*. But when we assume that sex just starts naturally like this, we're also assuming that our partners want the same thing. Checking in and openly communicating ensures that sex is mutually decided on and that both partners' desires are met.
- Some participants expressed that, over time, dating partners do not need to verbally communicate about sex because they already know what the other wants and likes. Partners probably have a good idea about what the other wants and likes, but sexual desires change all the time. Assuming we always know what our partner wants could have consequences (like one person engaging in unwanted or unenjoyable sex).
- Sometimes participants talked about how men are always in the mood for sex and need to orgasm once sexually aroused, which was sometimes used to excuse sexual assault. But

these are stereotypes. Sexual drive and desire vary from person to person regardless of gender and can fluctuate across time. And while erections can become uncomfortable for some men, they will go away with or without orgasm and there is never a point at which a person can't stop themselves. In fact, 91% of men surveyed privately in our study said they stop sexual activity when asked to, even if they are already aroused. There is no excuse to keep going when a partner declines sexual activity.

- Participants often said that women should communicate explicitly when they do not want to engage in sexual activity and that men can't be faulted for sexual assault if women don't communicate clearly. There was an underlying assumption that it's women's job to communicate, but men too have a responsibility to ask or clarify. And we know from research that most men understand when women decline sex even in gentle ways (without giving a firm "no"), so misunderstanding is never an excuse for sexual assault. Men are much more likely to sexually assault because they are ignoring or not taking seriously women's declines.

As this study suggests, the language we use is important and even seemingly harmless ideas about what it means to be a man (for example, the myth that men always want sex) can contribute to a culture that condones and allows sexual violence to continue.

Nevertheless, men in the focus groups sometimes spoke out against the negative stereotypes described above. In other cases, the trained focus group facilitators (research assistants) gently spoke out against them; for example, by encouraging participants to think about the consequences of those stereotypes for women and men or by providing statistics to show that most men, when asked privately, do not agree with harmful stereotypes or engage in sexually violent behaviours.

We all have a role to play in helping end sexual violence and resisting language that hurts women and condones sexual violence:

- Communicate openly and continually with sexual partners and pay attention to and respect both verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Don't look the other way when witnessing disrespect or abuse toward women.
- Question your own language, attitudes, and actions and whether they might inadvertently perpetuate sexism and violence, and work toward changing them.
- Recognize and speak out against sexist language and language that condones sexual violence.
- Educate yourself and others about stereotypes and myths that condone sexual violence and how you can be part of the solution:

<https://www.whiteribbon.ca/remodelling-our-masculinities>

<https://theviolencestopshere.ca/resources-to-end-violence/>