

## LIFE MATTERS: PREGNANCY FROM RAPE

A rape victim becoming pregnant—what situation could be more emotionally charged than that?

Even among those who are pro-life, some individuals are tempted to condone aborting children conceived from rape out of a natural empathy for the rape victim. Rape is an evil act. Since pregnancy from rape can seem to compound and prolong the victim's anguish, some believe that abortion will permit the rape victim to begin healing earlier.

Abortion advocates exploit this compassion, pointing endlessly to the "need" for abortion in the case of pregnancy from rape. Because abortion is already legal for any reason, their real purpose is to marginalize and malign those who are consistent in their pro-life beliefs—by characterizing them as insensitive and rigid. But this rhetoric perpetuates falsehoods that can further harm pregnant rape victims.

As a primary care physician and a former counselor for sexual assault victims, I have found that those who see abortion as the inevitable or best response in these cases are often uninformed. They are misled by destructive and dehumanizing stereotypes about rape, about victims of rape and about the outcome of rape-related pregnancy. Biases and stereotyping contribute to further traumatizing victims of rape. Each of us can help rape victims choose life.

### *Facts and fallacies*

*Definition:* Rape is not a sex crime. It is a crime of violence—a deeply personal and unwanted violation of a human being, a brutal exertion of power and control over another person. Power, not sexual desire, drives the assailant.<sup>1</sup> Victimizers can be husbands, boyfriends, family members and acquaintances. Stranger rape is estimated to represent only between 8 and 20 percent of all acts of rape.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. Department of Justice defines rape as: "Forced sexual intercourse including both psychological coercion as well as physical force. Forced sexual intercourse means penetration by the offender(s)." Sexual assault, in contrast, includes a wide range of unwanted sexual contact or verbal threats that may or may not involve force.<sup>3</sup>

*Prevalence and reporting:* According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (a large household survey of over 146,000 individuals over age 12), designed to capture reported and unreported crimes, there were 143,300 completed "rape and sexual assault victimizations" against females in the U.S. in 2010. That means an assault for every 1,000 females age 12 and older. The rate was highest among women under age 35. The great majority of victims were related to or in a relationship with their attacker. Only slightly over one-third reported the attack to police. Eleven percent of assaults were associated with a weapon. Injuries, ranging from gunshot wounds to minor bruises and cuts, were reported by 58 percent of victims. Only 35 percent of those with an injury sought treatment.<sup>4</sup>

### *Frequency of pregnancy related to rape:*

The number and percent of pregnancies resulting from rape is frequently overstated. There are two main reasons why relatively few rapes result in pregnancy. The average rate of pregnancy from a single act of unprotected sexual intercourse ranges from 2 to 4 percent.<sup>5</sup> In addition, 10.9 percent of U.S. women of childbearing age are infertile,<sup>6</sup> and over 41 percent have undergone surgical sterilization or are using a continuous form of contraception, reducing (though not eliminating) the likelihood of pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> A survey of U.S. women's reasons for choosing abortion found that only one percent reported "rape" as a reason and less than one half of one percent reported that rape was the main reason.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to bear in mind, however, that we are dealing not with a statistical issue, but a human one.

### *There are no "typical" victims*

There is no "normal" reaction to rape. As with other highly traumatic experiences, an individual's response is unpredictable. A myriad of reactions—depression, anger, anxiety, fear of retaliation, guilt, desire for revenge, humiliation, disbelief—are some of the short-term and long-term psychological reactions to rape.

Unfortunately, many people are still quick to blame the victim. "How could you have been so naïve as to trust him?" "I told you hanging around bars and staying out late would lead to trouble." "You send

the wrong message with the way you dress.” Blaming the victim discourages all victims from reporting rape, encourages isolation, and causes women to conceal signs of victimization. Because pregnancy cannot be hidden, the mentality of blaming the victim only encourages resort to abortion.

#### *Response to pregnancy*

Rape victims may respond in a variety of ways on learning they are pregnant—anger, fear, anxiety, depression, complacency and anything else you can imagine. Family and friends often feel helpless or are uncomfortable and embarrassed.

Advice such as “You have to put this behind you” and “It’s best not to dwell on what happened” may make recovery particularly difficult for a pregnant rape victim. Such advice does not express empathy for the victim, nor respect for the child in the event of pregnancy.

#### *The abortion solution?*

Abortion advocates perpetuate the myth that pregnant rape victims generally *desire* abortion, and this makes it difficult for women to choose the life-giving alternative for their child. We must not forget that pregnant rape victims aren’t suddenly separated from the person they were before the rape—they bring to this difficult journey their beliefs, their sense of right and wrong and everything else that they are.

In a survey I conducted of counseling agencies assisting women with problem pregnancies, therapists identified 37 women who had reported a rape-related pregnancy. Of them, 28 continued their pregnancy, 5 chose abortion and 4 were lost to follow up.<sup>9</sup> Many women in this study initially had strong negative feelings and fears. Of those who continued their pregnancy, two-thirds developed more positive feelings toward their unborn child as the pregnancy progressed. Their feelings of self esteem and contentedness improved during the pregnancy, while anxiety, depression, anger and fear decreased.

The abortion rate among rape victims (50 percent) is not substantially higher than among all women who report an “unintended pregnancy” (40 percent).<sup>10</sup> The majority of those who decided against abortion chose to raise their child, while a small percentage opted for adoption.<sup>11</sup> A study of

164 such women found that the majority of those who had abortions regretted having done so and said the abortion caused them additional problems.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, among those who delivered a child conceived by rape, satisfaction was higher and none stated any regret for having given birth.<sup>13</sup>



Abortion, therefore, is not an inevitable choice. The loving support of family, friends and counselors can make a huge difference.

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