

# Sex, Power and Consent

Youth culture and the  
unwritten rules

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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# 1

## Introduction

### Rewriting the rules?

CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CULTURE has been described as the ‘age of raunch’, ‘generation sex’ and generation SLUT (Sexually Liberated Urban Teens).<sup>1</sup> These are the times of an unprecedented sexualised, sex-crazed and sex-everywhere culture, following the so-called liberation of the 1960s and 1970s. The rules for negotiating a sexual relationship have changed and are still changing. Today’s young people – meaning those born in and after 1982, collectively referred to as ‘Generation Y (Gen-Y)’ or ‘Millennials’<sup>2</sup> – are negotiating their early love and sexual relationships in an increasingly fluid and uncertain environment. The apparent mellowing of traditional values towards sex, marriage and the family mean that Gen-Y is redefining these new rules. But just what is it about these rules that is changing? In what ways have they changed already? In what ways are they still the same?

Certainly, young people today are first engaging in sexual intercourse at an earlier age than their parents or grandparents did. The nature of their love/sex relationships is also changing. With most people marrying later, young people are more likely nowadays to have many sexual partners before settling down.<sup>3</sup> The sexual double standard, the concern with sexual reputation that once precluded women from engaging in sex for pleasure and outside of a long-term committed relationship, may have shifted and may even no longer exist.<sup>4</sup> We have been described as living in a post-feminist age, a time of girl power where ‘young women are saying, “We have a right to sexual pleasure,” and they’re going out and getting it.’<sup>5</sup>

Despite this apparent sexual freedom, however, rates of sexual assault continue to be of concern. For instance, Victoria Police data show that women represent 92 per cent of victims of sexual assault, while

99 per cent of offenders are male, consistent with figures across Australia and internationally.<sup>6</sup> How can we speak of ‘liberated’ and ‘empowered’ Gen-Y women when, according to Australian figures, as many as 10 per cent of women aged 18 to 24 will have experienced sexual violence in the last 12 months and young women aged 16 to 20 and 21 to 25 are the most likely to experience sexual assault?<sup>7</sup> The lived experience of young women brings these figures into sharper focus. As ‘Grace’, a 21-year-old woman living in metropolitan Melbourne, reveals:

I started seeing this guy and he knew I hadn’t had sex before and I wanted to wait and I wanted to, you know I wanted it to be special and everything blah, blah, blah. And in the end, I can only just remember before and then remember seeing him on top of me and then after it was over, I panicked . . .

Grace’s experience of forced sex from her boyfriend further demonstrates a common feature of sexual violence: that it is most often perpetrated at the hands of a known man rather than at the hands of a stranger. Perhaps as tragic as the experience itself, is that Grace holds herself at least partly responsible for it, another common feature of women’s experience of sexual violence:

. . . like it obviously was kind of partially consensual, I don’t know whether you’d classify it as rape or anything, but it was an experience I’d never want anyone else to go through, it was very traumatic. But, I don’t know how I should have dealt with it differently. I think I should have maybe not put so much trust in him.

Sexual assault data for younger teenage women are difficult to come by, but in one national survey, as many as 14 per cent of young women aged 12 to 20 reported that a boyfriend had tried to physically force them to have sex, and 6 per cent reported that they had been forced to have sex.<sup>8</sup> However, statistics on the prevalence of physically coerced sex are not representative of the self-reported 21 to 30 per cent of young women who have experienced unwanted or pressured sexual intercourse; figures range from 40 to 77 per cent of teenagers and young adults who report having experienced unwanted sexual activity.<sup>9</sup>

Yet what are we doing to help prevent experiences like Grace’s? What are we doing to truly empower young women and to place the responsibility for sexual violence where it belongs? Thirty years of law reform, programs and education to try to prevent sexual violence have not been enough

to truly change the experiences of young women. Tighter laws, teaching young women refusal skills and running campaigns that ‘no means no’, have not changed the old rules of negotiating sex and consent. It is time to seriously re-think our approach to reducing sexual violence. We need to engage both young women and young men in challenging a culture that continues to allow sexual violence to occur.

This book provides a window into the changing world of young people’s love/sex relationships. Through the perceptions and stories of 117 teens and young adults of diverse backgrounds and sexualities, the unwritten rules for negotiating sex and consent are explored (see [Appendix 1](#)). A central concern is the extent to which these rules might still represent unequal and potentially harmful understandings of gender and consent. Young people’s experiences of equal and ethical negotiation in their love/sex relationships are also explored. By talking to young people in Victoria, Australia, about how they negotiate their sexual encounters, this book sheds light on the complexity of sexual consent and on the varying capacities of young people to actively engage in consensual sexual practice. It considers several key questions. What meanings do love/sex relationships hold for Gen-Y? How do young people negotiate sexual encounters and why might they do so in these ways? How can we account for the persistence of pressured and unwanted sex in young women’s experiences? What are we doing to try to prevent young women’s experiences of pressured and unwanted sex and, crucially, what more needs to be done?

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

To answer these key questions, this book engages with current theoretical debates, emerging international research and the lived realities of Gen-Y Australians aged 14 to 24 years. By bridging these different perspectives, I develop a unique and challenging approach to both our understandings of youth sexuality and the prevention of sexual violence. Tackling these issues presents numerous challenges: understanding young people’s experiences of unwanted sex and negotiations of sexual consent; seeking to understand the contemporary influences on these negotiations; and at the same time resisting particular problematisations of youth as a fixed category and of sex as something inherently risky and dangerous. Recognising this complexity, this book is as much about acknowledging young people’s varied experiences and voices as it is about sexual violence prevention – the two

are absolutely connected and young people's voices should always inform policy and program work. Thus a key theme that emerges is the need to take seriously the views and experiences of young people themselves in the development of policy and programs that affect them. In doing so, it has been my intention throughout this book to bring both sociological theory and qualitative empirical research to bear on policy and practice for those *in* policy and practice.

At the same time, this book articulates some critical social and theoretical analyses regarding sex, gender, violence and prevention. The theoretical perspectives with which we seek to understand these issues have important implications for what we do in practice. In this book, drawing significantly on the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu and engaging with postmodern feminist and gender theorists, I develop a theoretical framework for understanding gendered power relations and the negotiation of consent. This framework seeks to take account of both the persistent social structures and rules governing these negotiations and young people's capacity to rewrite the rules and negotiate consensual and ethical sex. In turn, this framework informs the empirical work undertaken and the models of sexual violence prevention that have been considered.

## WHY YOUNG PEOPLE?

In the earliest stages of developing the research on which this book is based, I decided to focus on young people, whom I defined as aged 14 to 24. This decision is not intended to dismiss the fact that sexual violence affects individuals across the lifespan. Indeed, recent Australian survey research indicates that women aged 25 to 69 also report experiencing sexual violence, and there is much evidence to suggest that pressured and unwanted sex, particularly in intimate relationships, remain significant issues for adult women, despite being rarely acknowledged.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, women aged 18 to 24 are repeatedly reflected in various data sources, including police reports and national surveys, as the most common victims of sexual violence.<sup>11</sup> As a young woman myself, while undertaking this research, I also felt compelled to focus on the experiences of young people. Yet more than this, I and many people I spoke to had also observed that media and public debate frequently focused on young people and sex, often within an overwhelmingly negative risk-based framing of the issues. Debates appear to focus on young people only as problems to be managed, and often name young women's sexual behaviour in particular as risky

or dangerous<sup>12</sup> without acknowledging the broader gendered context in which young people's sexuality is lived and experienced. With so much discussion circulating about young people and sex, I became concerned to make sure that young people's own views and experiences were somehow entered into these debates.

## WHY PREVENTION?

The overarching concern of this book is with the *prevention* of sexual violence. This is not in any way to downplay the continued need for support and services to assist victim/survivors of sexual violence, or the importance of police and justice responses to perpetrators. There can be no doubt that these sectors play a pivotal role in dealing with sexual violence. Yet we also know from national research that many victims of sexual violence never report their experience to police or other formal response services. Indeed, 85 per cent of women who experience sexual violence do not report it to police.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as this book discusses, there is much sexual pressure and unwanted sex that, while not necessarily fitting within the legal frame of sexual assault, nonetheless requires societal action.

Notably, in the last five years, there has also been a significant focus within Australian Government and policy debates on the role of prevention to address violence against women, including sexual violence. This focus is reflected at Federal level in the work of the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, and at State level in the various departmental policies guiding both responses to and prevention of violence against women. For example, the Victorian Government launched a state plan to prevent violence against women in November 2009.<sup>14</sup> The plan builds on a public health model for primary violence prevention, i.e. before it occurs, supported by the work of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) on a framework for preventing violence against women. The Victorian State Plan to Prevent Violence against Women is the first of its kind in Australia and indeed one of the few examples of concentrated government policy and leadership for the primary prevention of violence against women in the world. This local context and the significance of this work internationally, places the prevention of sexual violence firmly on the policy agenda. Now, more than ever, there is a need for conceptual and empirical work that brings together the issues of sex, power and consent with frameworks for violence prevention.

## NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The language used to describe sexual violence, and those who experience it, can carry with it particular meanings that are important both symbolically in the field and in legal terminology. Throughout this book, experiences of pressured and coerced sex are discussed under the umbrella term ‘sexual violence’, alongside criminally defined offences of sexual assault. I deliberately use the term sexual violence broadly so as to acknowledge the full range of experiences (see [Chapter 2](#)), and to remain consistent with the approach adopted by the sexual assault service sector. For instance, Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) in Victoria refer to sexual violence as: ‘any behaviour of a sexual nature that makes someone feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened’.<sup>15</sup>

This book is also primarily concerned with the prevention of sexual violence against women because 92 per cent of the victims of sexual violence are women. I do not intend to ignore or silence men’s experiences of broad forms of sexual violence. There is a growing acknowledgement and service response to male victims of sexual violence, as evidenced by the funding of specialist counsellors in many sexual assault services specifically for male victims. At the same time, men’s experiences of sexual violence differ from women’s in some important respects, which reflect the particular gendered pattern of this form of violence. For example, where men are victims of sexual violence, it is also often the case that the perpetrator too is male.<sup>16</sup> Thus prevention of sexual violence against women requires separate analysis and strategies from prevention of sexual violence against men.

Consistent with the scope of this book, the term ‘victim’ has been used throughout to refer to women who experience sexual violence. I acknowledge that there are significant ongoing debates over the use of this term, with some women – including many in the sexual assault service sector – preferring to use the word ‘survivor’ or the dual term ‘victim-survivor’. In legal proceedings, a victim of sexual violence is typically referred to as the ‘complainant’ or ‘alleged victim’. While each of these terms could be equally valid I have, for consistency, used the term victim. Likewise, for the purposes of this book I have also used the word ‘perpetrator’ to refer to those who engage in sexual violence against women (or ‘alleged offender/perpetrator’ when referring to a specific criminal case). I use these terms in this way because together they more accurately reflect the gendered nature of sexual violence and the seriousness of the harms that women experience, most commonly, at the hands of men. It is also the language adopted throughout much Australian public policy and



as such provides a level of consistency with the terminology referred to in that field.

‘Prevention’ too, is a term that can vary in meaning across disciplines and professional fields. For simplicity, I use ‘prevention’ throughout this book to refer broadly to the primary prevention of sexual violence, that is, to strategies that target the underlying causes of violence before it occurs.<sup>17</sup> Primary prevention as a category is typically used to distinguish this kind of work from both secondary prevention, which targets ‘at risk’ populations, and tertiary prevention, which responds to past victims or perpetrators of violence to prevent future occurrences. I use ‘secondary’ and ‘tertiary’ prevention only to refer to these specific elements. However, as noted by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and others, it is not always possible to draw clear boundaries around these three levels of prevention.<sup>18</sup>

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In [Chapter 2](#) (Generation Y: Problematic representations of youth and sex), I consider the popularised ‘problem’ of youth sex, and the extent to which pressured and unwanted sex remains a feature of Gen-Y’s sexual encounters. I suggest that the ways in which Western society understands and responds to youth sex generally has clear implications for the ways in which we understand and respond to pressured and unwanted sex. This is followed by a discussion of young people’s own views and experiences regarding the various unwritten rules influencing their sexual encounters in [Chapter 3](#) (Sex: The ‘new’ rules of engagement).

Beyond approaches to youth sexuality in particular, there are a number of social and cultural understandings of sex, love and consent that guide love and sexual relationships. In [Chapter 4](#) (Power: Framing sexual violence in young people’s everyday encounters) I employ contemporary social and feminist theories to account for the rules of sexual engagement, and to begin to consider the structural and cultural explanations for pressured and unwanted sex in young people’s love/sex encounters.

In [Chapter 5](#) (Consent: Negotiating consensual sex) I explore young people’s views and experiences of responding to pressured and unwanted sex and negotiating sexual consent. Drawing on Grace’s story, as well as the varied experiences of both young women and young men, the gaps between young people’s experience of negotiating consent and current legal models of consent are also explored. [Chapter 6](#) (Technology: Unauthorised sexual images and sexual violence) further explores legal issues in relation

to the emerging use of information and communication technologies to distribute images of sexual violence and other unauthorised sexual images among youth.

Then, in **Chapters 7 and 8** (Education: Sex, power and consent in schools and Prevention: Policy, programs and practical strategies), the implications of the previous discussions are considered for how we approach both sex education in schools and sexual violence prevention with young people more broadly. By engaging both with young people's experiences, and with informed critiques of sexuality education and violence prevention, I examine the promises and limitations of current education-based initiatives to prevent sexual violence amongst youth.

Finally, in the **Chapter 9** (Conclusion: Rewriting the rules and preventing sexual violence), the closing thoughts and implications of the main research findings are summarised. I suggest that there is a continuing need to frame responses to youth sexuality and the prevention of sexual violence in a way that engages young men and women as active agents in their sexual choice-making and capable of reflection upon these choices. In the absence of this framing, the sexual choices of Gen-Y women, and indeed Gen-Y men, will remain forced choices – or at the very least, pressured. As the title of this chapter suggests, there is a need to continue to re-write the gendered rules governing the negotiation of sex and consent if we are ever truly to prevent sexual violence.

## NOTES

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- 15 Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) website, <http://www.casa.org.au/>
- 16 See, for instance, Heenan and Murray, *Reported rapes in profile*; Victoria Police, *Crime statistics 2008–2009*.
- 17 VicHealth, *Preventing violence before it occurs: A framework and background paper to guide the primary prevention of violence against women in Victoria* (Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2007).
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# 2

## Generation Y

### Problematic representations of youth and sex

TURN TO PRINT and television media or public debate and the message is consistent: youth are a problem in need of a solution. According to the media, public officials and many parents, youth crime is up and teenage sex and oral sex have reached epidemic proportions at the same time that school results, homework and university ambition have gone down.<sup>1</sup> Yet, 'hardly anybody has confronted them with the plain fact that *all of those statements are false*'.<sup>2</sup> What has not changed is the tendency of adult generations to become anxious about perceived problem shifts in youth values and behaviours.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps especially true when it comes to youth sexuality. As University of London youth sexuality researcher Peter Aggleton and his colleagues exclaim: 'Put the words "youth" and "sex" together and you are sure to generate controversy'.<sup>4</sup> Yet if we take a closer look at youth sexuality we see that while some things have indeed changed, many things have changed much less than is commonly believed.

I begin by setting the scene of youth sexuality with a brief review of the changes experienced by Gen-Y in the Western context. There are a number of challenges faced by today's young people, brought about largely by the processes of modernity and in particular an advanced consumer-capitalist society, as well as gendered social change. I then consider the popularised 'problem' of youth sexuality, as well as the very real issue of sexual violence, with a particular focus on young women's experiences of pressured and unwanted sex. Finally, I review the implications of sexual pressure and coercion for young people's sexual health. In doing so, this chapter gives a broad background to the specific exploration in later chapters of pressured and unwanted sex in young people's love/sex relationships.

## GENERATION Y: YOUTH AT RISK?

What does it mean to be Gen-Y and how can we understand and explain the bad reputation of this generation amongst their elders? The concept of 'generation' is widely used in everyday language, typically referring to the differences between age groupings or birth cohorts of people, and to locate individuals in a particular historical context. Recently, much has been made in the media and public debate about the generation gap between the Baby Boomers and Gen-X on the one hand and Gen-Y on the other.

A number of popular books speak of the unique characteristics and particular problems of different generations. The work of US authors Neil Howe and William Strauss (*Generations* and *Millennials rising*) is well known on this topic. Howe and Strauss point out that Gen-Y members are more likely to be university educated, are on the whole more affluent, more technologically savvy, and more accepting of racial and sexual diversity than previous generations. They also suggest that Gen-Y has received an unfair 'bad rap' from adult generations who overstate the problems and pitfalls of today's youth and underestimate their potential as the 'next great generation'.

Attention to the significance of generations within the social sciences has been somewhat scant. Most sociologists tend to agree that the idea of youth is itself a modern phenomenon, one that is characteristic of advanced industrial societies with well-developed educational systems. For example, in his book *Centuries of childhood*, Phillip Aries argues that youth is a relatively modern concept. According to Aries it was only from the mid 17th century that young people started to be seen as both dependent on adults and as having special characteristics of their own.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in psychology, the concept of adolescence only started to become current at the end of the 18th century.

The specific idea of adolescence, defined as a period 'between childhood and adulthood', was outlined by G Stanley Hall in his 1904 book, *Adolescence*, which provides the first 20th century discussion of the supposed relationship between adolescence and distinctive patterns of behaviour among young people. Hall described several 'problems of youth', including: unbridled sexuality; rejection of parents/teachers; lack of concentration; extremes of emotion including aggression; and unpredictability. Youth problem behaviour was seen to result from chemically based body changes in the transition from child to adulthood, with social conditions seen as aggravating this condition. Hall thus placed great emphasis upon

adolescence as being a time of emotional ‘storm and stress’, suggesting that the concept of adolescence relates to the psychological problems associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood in *modern* societies – problems that only arise in these types of society because small-scale, non-industrialised societies do not develop a transition period between childhood and adulthood.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of youth itself then, refers to more than a period of chronological age: it refers to the particular ways in which popular and expert knowledge about young people is itself socially constituted. The social construction of youth, and in particular ‘problem’ youth, is demonstrated by the ways in which children and young people are differently defined and understood across time and social location. While at some periods in Western culture – and indeed in other cultures – young people have been considered capable of making adult decisions and taking on adult responsibilities, in contemporary Western culture youth is understood as a phase of transition from childhood to adulthood. Consequently, youths may have the biological characteristics of adults but are still viewed as emotionally and intellectually not adults and are therefore also seen as being in need of particular guidance and protection.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the very concept of adolescence only coming into existence at the start of the 20th century,<sup>8</sup> it appears that for much of the time since, adults have been concerned about problem behaviours of youth<sup>9</sup> and in particular about the policing of youth sexuality. For example, in her book *Act your age! A cultural construction of adolescence*, Professor Nancy Lesko describes a number of key assumptions that influence how adults understand and respond to young people, in particular, their immaturity, their ‘raging hormones’ and their difficult transition to adulthood. Lesko critiques these assumptions, suggesting that they are socially constructed – the product of a particular place and time – and not necessarily in the best interests of society or young people themselves. Rather, Lesko seeks to reimagine adolescence: to see young people differently and involve young people as active participants in decisions affecting their lives. She calls on those working with young people to acknowledge their capacities for making reasoned choices and for engaging in mature, responsible actions.

## THE CHALLENGES FACING GENERATION Y

Analyses such as Nancy Lesko’s remind us that we should avoid essentialising young people, that is, viewing all young people as having an inherent set

of natural or inevitable characteristics. While it would be overly simplistic to ignore that there are various challenges facing today's young people – some of which may be quite unlike the challenges that have faced previous generations of youth – it may also be the case that some young people are well equipped to respond to these challenges, and that there are ways to enhance other young people's capacities to respond.

One of the key contemporary challenges facing today's youth is the increasing uncertainty that characterises modern life. Since the start of the 21st century, sociologists have been suggesting that with the decline of many traditional boundary setting social institutions (such as organised religion, the nuclear family and the life-long career trajectory) self-identity itself has become much more 'reflexive'<sup>10</sup> or 'liquid'.<sup>11</sup> This means that the guidelines – the social rules and structures – that we once looked to to tell us who we were and who we should be are no longer as influential. Today, all of us living in late modernity, young people included, are making up the rules and reinventing ourselves as we go along. Not only this, but sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that this reflexivity occurs with no higher moral reasoning to guide it. For young people today, there is little to guide them – the world is full of apparently endless choices.

Another key challenge facing Gen-Y is the so-called age of raunch, which has been force fed to today's young people more than to any previous generation, thanks to a culture of highly sexualised consumer capitalism. Young women are represented in the advertising media and throughout popular culture in particular sexualised ways. As Ariel Levy suggests in her book *Female chauvinist pigs*, it is as if feminism gave women the right to choose to be sexual, but not *what kind* of sexual – what appears in the public domain is a very narrow and unfulfilling view of women's (and men's) sexuality. In a world with apparently endless choice, young women and girls are simultaneously under pressure to conform to particular versions of so-called empowered female sexuality. And these notions of sexuality are reinforced, according to some authors, by marketing and advertising deliberately representing girls and young women as sexual objects for male consumption.<sup>12</sup>

Emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs) are a feature of contemporary young adulthood that pose potential challenges. For example, the focus of much recent public debate has been the revelations about young people 'sexting' (sending sexually explicit text and picture messages via their mobile phones). While there is as yet little Australian research into the exact nature and prevalence of sexting, some surveys have found that as many as 25 per cent of respondents have been asked to send a

nude picture of themselves, and as many as 51 per cent of teenage girls say they sent the sex message due to pressure from a boy.<sup>13</sup> Certainly reports from schools and parents suggest that sexting is an important emerging issue in the Australian context.<sup>14</sup> Two particular concerns are that teenage girls and young women may be experiencing pressure to send the sexually explicit images in the first instance, and that, where the initial image has been sent with consent, they are not prepared for widespread circulation of the image without their consent, which can often be the case. Emerging technologies have also been used in the perpetration of sexual assault itself. The challenges that the increasing use of ICTs present for young people's sexual encounters will be taken up further in subsequent chapters.

## THE PROBLEM OF YOUTH SEX

In many respects the times have indeed changed: young people today *are* often younger when they first experience sexual intercourse than were their parents or grandparents and, due to trends in delayed marriage and childbirth, young people are also likely to have had more sexual partners by the time they enter this stage of adult life. According to Victorian data, about one-third of Year 11 students have engaged in intercourse.<sup>15</sup> The average age of first intercourse for young people (born between 1981 and 1986) is 16 years, the legal age of sexual consent. Yet, while this is a decrease in age from 18 years at first intercourse for those now aged 50 to 59 years,<sup>16</sup> international research suggests that the steepest drop in age actually occurred during the 1950s and 60s and that the trend of increasing proportions of adolescents aged 15 to 19 engaging in sex had stabilised by the late 1980s.<sup>17</sup> About 5 per cent of today's young people report being same-sex attracted, with 2 per cent of most-recent sexual encounters being same-sex encounters.<sup>18</sup>

But do all of these changes really constitute a problem? Young people today are also more likely to have used a condom or other form of contraception at their first experience of heterosexual intercourse, with 90.2 per cent of men and 94.8 per cent of women who first had sex in the 2000s doing so, compared to just 17 per cent of men and 34.6 per cent of women in the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, young men aged 16 to 19 are also most likely of any age group to have used a condom during their most-recent heterosexual encounter, with 80.3 per cent doing so, compared to just 42.8 per cent of men aged 20 to 29.<sup>20</sup> While these data reflect that young people more consistently use condoms than older people, this is also a reflection of broader patterns of condom use. For instance, condoms are



most likely to be used with a casual rather than a regular sexual partner, and when other forms of contraception such as the pill are not being used.<sup>21</sup> Thus young people's higher rates of condom use may also reflect that they are less likely to have settled down with a regular partner.

In line with these trends showing improved sexual health practices amongst youth, the rate of teenage pregnancies has continued to decline in developed countries.<sup>22</sup> Recent Australian data suggest a significant shift in the age of first-time mothers, with a significant increase in the number of women aged 35 years and over giving birth for the first time.<sup>23</sup> Australian data further suggest that 'the bulk of Australia's unplanned pregnancies are likely to be attributable to method failure rather than inconsistent use'.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, while contraceptive use amongst young women under 20 is slightly lower than for the general population, this difference has not been found to be statistically significant. In other words, while Gen-Y may have had early and regular exposure to sexual issues, 'This exposure has also helped make this generation more sexually aware and responsible',<sup>25</sup> as evidenced by increased contraceptive use and older ages at first pregnancy.

It is not all good news, however. While Australia's rate of teenage pregnancy is lower than New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom, it remains higher than many European countries,<sup>26</sup> such as The Netherlands, Switzerland and Sweden. There are also data to indicate that despite relatively high rates of condom use amongst youth, there remains a higher rate of some sexually transmissible infections, such as chlamydia, amongst 15 to 24-year-olds than among the general population,<sup>27</sup> reflecting that there is room for improvement.

The continued fear, even moral panic, among adults about youth sex and sexual practices can have significant implications for policies affecting young people, including those surrounding sexuality education. According to many researchers, this helps explain adult fears in relation to youth sexuality, such that young people remain understood within the 'sexually innocent' frame of childhood.<sup>28</sup> Yet contemporary Western taboos about young people and sex are not simply to be dismissed as over-zealous or irrational: they arise in particular social contexts. These taboos reflect broader concerns about the breakdown of the traditional family structure,<sup>29</sup> a structure that has long been viewed as integral to economic security. Youths engaging in sex reminds us that Western values towards marriage and the family have changed, and continue to change. According to some, young women's sexuality in particular also plays on fears – perpetuated in media and policy discourse though largely unfounded – of a growing 'underclass' of young single mothers dependent on state resources.<sup>30</sup>

Importantly, taboos regarding young people and sex also reflect our fears that children and adolescents may be easily exploited and victimised by adults.<sup>31</sup> In defending the concept that children and young people need protection from sexual exploitation, Western society has become invested in the idea that we cannot simultaneously allow them any sexual agency at all. Young people are seen as lacking the maturity to make good sexual decisions as well as being vulnerable to sexual corruption or victimisation.<sup>32</sup>

Paradoxically, ongoing emphasis in public debate on the ‘dangers’ of youth sex in terms of pregnancy and disease sometimes prevents rather than encourages adults talking to young people about sex. The appropriateness of delivering sexuality education to young people and the risk of inadvertently encouraging youth sex continues to be debated in the US, where vast amounts of funding are dedicated to education programs promoting youth abstinence until marriage.<sup>33</sup> In Australia, while abstinence programs have not featured prominently in schools to the extent that they have in the US, school sexuality education is inconsistently delivered by teachers not necessarily specifically trained or resourced for the task.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the aims and content of sexuality education remain subject to considerable disagreement in the context of often widely divergent views of parents, teachers, governments and cultural and religious communities. The views of young people themselves are rarely canvassed or considered in the sexuality education debate or in the formation of policy and curricula.<sup>35</sup> This reflects and reinforces their largely uncontested status as ‘not adults’ who are in need of guidance, rather than as potential sexual agents who have unique knowledge and insight into their own education needs.

## RESPONDING TO YOUTH SEX

Where policy makers and educators do intervene, responses to youth sex often have explicit and implicit moral undertones that reinforce particular understandings about men, women and sex. Even in allegedly sexually liberated Western societies, social institutions such as education, public health – and in many cases the family – continue to expect young men’s sexuality to be uncontrollable, and to focus most of their efforts on policing young *women’s* sexuality.<sup>36</sup> This is apparent both in the content of sexuality education and health promotion programs that continue to teach young women refusal skills and how to ‘say no’ and in the content of much youth sexuality research, which focuses on young women’s sexual decision making to the virtual exclusion of young men’s.<sup>37</sup>

The moral panic over young women's sexuality, in particular, is further evidenced by widespread public concerns that girls are physically maturing at an earlier age. Data suggest that the average age of puberty for girls is approximately 10 years, with the average for boys being slightly lower.<sup>38</sup> Compared with previous studies there has indeed been a shift of about one year, *for both sexes*. However, concern over 'early' sexual maturation appears to be confined to girls, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that some parents in the US are asking doctors for treatments to slow down the process for their daughters, but not their sons.<sup>39</sup>

As British researcher Deborah Tolman notes in her book *Dilemmas of desire*, in many ways it is not surprising that so much effort is focused on policing young women's sexuality. After all, it is young women who often bear the brunt of problematic youth sex in terms of poor health outcomes, including teenage pregnancy and sexual violence. However, policy makers and educators should remain vigilant about the potential negative impact on young women and their sexuality of a sole emphasis on risk and danger. Positioning youth sex as an object of anxiety and risk, rather than a normal feature of many relationships, undermines young people's potential to actively negotiate and make choices about this period in their lives.<sup>40</sup> It precludes a simultaneous expectation of responsible and safe sexual behaviour on the part of youth. Yet, what would happen if we *did* support young people's exploration of sexuality and their ability to deal with it? Data from European countries such as The Netherlands and Denmark suggest that open and progressive approaches to youth sex produce better (not worse) sexual health statistics, lower rates of teenage pregnancy and older (not younger) ages at first sex.<sup>41</sup> Highlighting the potential danger associated with positioning youth as by definition 'at risk' does not mean, however, that society should not intervene at all. Rather, the lesson is to be particularly vigilant about the assumptions underlying our interventions, and their possible impacts on those we are trying to help.

## **RAPE MYTHS AND THE CONTINUUM OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

Contemporary young people must negotiate a tension – when it comes to sexuality – between messages of sex as danger or risk and messages promoting young people's engagement in an exaggerated raunch culture. At the same time, the persistence of sexual violence remains cause for concern. As mentioned in [Chapter 1](#), in Australia 10 per cent of young women aged 18 to 24 report experiencing sexual violence in the last

12 months.<sup>42</sup> Young women continue to be the segment of society at highest risk of experiencing sexual violence, and this continues to be most likely at the hands of a known man, such as a boyfriend, friend or acquaintance, rather than at the hands of a stranger.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, a recent study of reported sexual assaults in Victoria indicates that young women are most likely to be assaulted by a male of a similar age.<sup>44</sup> The term 'sexual violence' in contemporary discourse may include more than rape and sexual assault, however; it also sometimes includes the harassment, unwanted and pressured sex which continue to be a problem, and not just for the young. Negotiating sexual consent can be difficult for adults as well, both in long-term relationships and in more casual sexual relationships. Many women who are married or cohabit with a male partner, for instance, report experiencing unwanted and pressured sex.<sup>45</sup> The potential ambiguity of consent and sexual violence is perhaps best represented in feminist researcher Liz Kelly's influential work, in which she proposed that rather than discrete categories of violence and non-violence, women's experience exists along a continuum from 'choice to pressure to coercion to force'.<sup>46</sup>

Kelly's concept of a continuum of sexual violence makes clear the important points that a woman does not have to experience physical force in order to experience sexual violence and that subtle systemic forms of sexual harassment, pressure and coercion are part of the same behaviour as the most violent of physical assaults. This is despite much adherence in Western societies to a number of beliefs about what counts, and does not count, as sexual violence: commonly referred to as 'rape myths'. Feminist philosopher Lois Pineau and feminist criminologist Patricia Eastaer, among many others, have written about the operation of rape myths in minimising women's experiences and blaming women for sexual violence against them. Commonly cited beliefs include that: rape requires physical force; rape requires physical resistance by the victim; and the rapist is ordinarily a stranger.

Research has repeatedly shown that these beliefs about 'typical' or 'legitimate' rape are in fact not at all typical of most women's experiences of sexual violence. In fact, women most commonly experience sexual violence from a known man. While the courts are somewhat better at defining sexual violence when the victim has the requisite levels of physical injuries – usually those sustained from a severe bashing – we know that violent bashing is less common than other threats, coercion and targeting someone who is not in a position to give informed consent – while they are drunk, asleep or unconscious for example. Certainly such examples would usually mean that there is little physical resistance by the victim, but these

are not the only reasons why sexual violence might occur without physical force or resistance. The very situation that the perpetrator is usually a known man means that women are often quite literally taken by surprise by rape, experiencing shock and disbelief at what is occurring. Even if a victim does manage to gather the presence of mind to realise and respond to what is happening to them, many freeze, feeling too afraid or physically unable to resist, not least because it might invite more force against them. While society generally may readily understand sex that occurs in the context of a violent assault as rape, there is much less understanding of the subtleties and complexities of sexual violence. Yet these experiences are remarkably common.

According to an Australian survey of sexually active secondary school students of both sexes conducted in 2002, just over a quarter (25.9 per cent) reported that they had experienced 'unwanted' sex, with the most common reason cited by young women being that they experienced 'pressure' from a sexual partner, while young men most commonly reported that they were 'too drunk'.<sup>47</sup> Alarmingly, in a repeat survey in 2008, rates of unwanted sex were found to have increased significantly for young women since the 2002 survey, while young men's experiences of unwanted sex had decreased. In both surveys, 'pressure' from a partner was cited as the most common reason for young women's unwanted sexual experience.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, international research has shown that fear of a partner getting angry or ending the relationship if sex is denied is a common reason cited for engaging in unwanted sex.<sup>49</sup> A number of studies over the last twenty years have explored what is sometimes referred to as the 'grey area' of the sexual violence continuum, and have similarly found that physical force and verbal threats are less common than experiences of direct and indirect pressures to participate in sex, with some studies finding up to 63 per cent of women in their samples have sex 'not because they wanted to, but because [they] felt it would be inappropriate to refuse'.<sup>50</sup> Other studies have explored what they refer to as 'sexual compliance' – where one partner actively chooses to consent to unwanted sex. While men too engage in compliant sexual behaviour, most often it is women who comply with men's sexual initiative.<sup>51</sup>

One of the concerns of this book is to explore the complex and often subtle ways in which young women, in particular, experience sex that is not wanted. For this reason I have encouraged the young people I've interviewed to talk broadly about pressured and unwanted sex, rather than focusing purely on sexual coercion by young men against young women. This is not to suggest that I do not perceive such direct coercion and

violence as a very real problem requiring continued attention. However, in my view these more subtle levels of social and cultural pressure can help to explain the grey area in the sexual violence continuum and are therefore worthy of further investigation. Moreover, there is now much research to suggest that women do not necessarily apply the terms 'sexual violence' or 'sexual assault' to their experience<sup>52</sup> and thus some women's self-defined experiences of 'pressured' or 'unwanted' sex may indeed cross over into the coercion or force end of the sexual violence continuum.

In relation to coercive and violent non-consensual sex, there exists a large body of research on the pathology of male sexually violent offenders.<sup>53</sup> However, the relatively few studies exploring the more prevalent experience of pressured and unwanted sex appear to be primarily concerned with young *women's* sexual decision making and their ability to say 'no', rather than simultaneously focusing on young men's negotiation of sexual encounters. Indeed, some researchers claim that young people's experiences of unwanted sex have little to do with sexual violence, but rather represent a period of trial-and-error during adolescence in which skills of sexual negotiation and refusal are developed.<sup>54</sup> Other researchers, however, argue that the pressures to engage in unwanted sex in everyday relationships are intrinsically related to the coercion or force end of the sexual violence continuum, and that intervention is needed to prevent sexual violence across all these levels.<sup>55</sup> It is this latter view that informs much of the approach I adopt in this book.

### **PRESSURED AND UNWANTED SEX: IMPLICATIONS FOR SEXUAL HEALTH AND AUTONOMY**

Experiences of sexual violence, whether in the form of physical force and coercion or pressured and unwanted sex, have direct implications for young women's sexuality and sexual health.<sup>56</sup> Women who experience unwanted sex report negative psychological and social outcomes regardless of whether they have personally labelled their experience as 'sexual assault' or 'abuse'.<sup>57</sup> In addition to poorer physical and mental health, adolescent women who experience unwanted sex are reported to be at increased risk of re-victimisation in adulthood and of experiencing other forms of abuse, including domestic violence.<sup>58</sup> Several recent studies also show that young women's experience of unwanted sex is associated with greater likelihood of being diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and with a pregnancy.<sup>59</sup>

While it can be argued that there is some degree of risk associated with all experiences of sex, what is not commonly acknowledged is that these risks are not evenly distributed. Gen-Y may be more educated and affluent in general, but they also grew up in an era when the gap between rich and poor was increasing in most Western societies.<sup>60</sup> This gap in economic resources is associated with disparities in opportunities for exercising sexual autonomy and promoting sexual health. For instance, some studies have shown that young women who are unemployed, from low-income families or who perform poorly in school are more likely to experience sexual violence.<sup>61</sup> According to recent New Zealand research, while young women from varying class backgrounds may experience a teenage pregnancy, those who are socially and educationally advantaged are more likely to choose and have access to an abortion, enabling them to continue their education.<sup>62</sup>

Living in a rural or regional area can also create distinct barriers for young people's sexual health and decision making. For instance, the scarcity of sexual health services and reduced confidentiality in regional towns can limit young people's access to information as well as to condoms and other contraception.<sup>63</sup> Such lack of access can be compounded for same-sex-attracted-youth (SSAY) for whom confidentiality may be particularly important, or who may be denied services due to their sexuality.<sup>64</sup> Victims of sexual violence in rural areas also lack access to counselling and support. Some research suggests that rates of sexual violence may be higher in rural areas, though the statistical data are contradictory.<sup>65</sup> For instance, in Victoria, according to police data on reported sexual assault, two rural regions had the same rate of reported rape offences as the metropolitan area, though two other rural regions had higher rates of non-rape sexual offences.<sup>66</sup> These data do not, however, account for other variations between rural and urban regions, such as possible differences in reporting of sexual offences.<sup>67</sup>

Furthermore, non-reporting of sexual assault to police is itself a significant problem, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Women's safety survey* estimating a reporting rate of just 15 per cent. Data on the extent of sexual violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are particularly affected by under-reporting, though available data suggest an increased risk of sexual violence for Indigenous women compared to non-Indigenous women.<sup>68</sup> In addition, many Indigenous women experience multiple barriers of social disadvantage, including poverty, unemployment, poor health and lack of access to health and other services.<sup>69</sup> Indigenous women who experience sexual violence also face unique barriers to accessing justice through courts, including discrimination from the

judiciary and juries and language barriers.<sup>70</sup> Women from some culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD) may also face similar barriers to reporting sexual violence and accessing sexual health services, though whether there is an increased risk of sexual violence is unclear.<sup>71</sup> A lack of culturally specific sexual health and support services continues to be an issue for women from both Indigenous and CALD communities.

While young women are at particular risk of sexual assault and experiences of unwanted sex, it is important to remember that it is not just age and gender that affect these experiences. Sexual violence and its implications for sexual health and autonomy can also have varying effects according to class, rurality, sexuality and race. Furthermore, interactions between these factors may compound the barriers experienced.

However, the concept of sexual health is not just about the *avoidance* of disease and non-consensual sexual experiences – it is increasingly considered to encompass development of a positive sexual identity and ability to experience sexual pleasure.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, youth sexuality researcher Impett and colleagues describe sexual health with respect to adolescence as:

the ability to acknowledge one's own sexual feelings, the freedom and comfort to explore wanted sexual behaviour and refuse unwanted behaviour, and the requisite knowledge and ability to protect oneself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancy.<sup>73</sup>

An overwhelming tendency to perceive youth sex as a danger in and of itself, and to dwell on the associated risks, may cause us to forget that it is appropriate and necessary for young people to develop a healthy, positive sexual identity and approach to sexual pleasure. Indeed, some researchers suggest that acknowledging young people's sexuality and their development as sexual agents is an important step in supporting their capacity to negotiate safer and consensual sex.<sup>74</sup> This is particularly relevant to young women, whose sexuality appears to be more commonly associated with problems rather than potential pleasure. The problematisation of youth sex as inherently risky constrains both the ways it is understood and what is and is not done about it. A focus purely on risk can preclude the development of more positive frameworks within which safe and consensual sexual practices and the formation of positive and confident approaches to negotiating sexual encounters by youth can be encouraged.

Throughout this book, in agreement with many other sexuality researchers, I take the position that to prevent sexual violence across the continuum of women's experiences we must simultaneously be concerned



with promoting mutuality, reciprocity and ethical negotiation of sexual encounters.<sup>75</sup> This positioning is crucial because of the often subtle and complex ways in which sex can be pressured and how thoroughly this is connected to sexual violence.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The popularised ‘problem’ of youth sexuality might cause us to forget that creating a healthy, positive sexual identity is a valuable developmental task for young people. While it can be argued that there is some degree of risk associated with all experiences of sex, research into the sexual behaviours of Gen-Y suggests that for the most part they are enjoying safer and healthier sex than is commonly believed. However, it is also evident that pressured and unwanted sex remains a feature of many Gen-Y women’s sexual encounters. Moreover, the experience of sexual violence, anywhere along the violence continuum, can have significant implications for young women’s sexual health, and in particular for already marginalised youth.

Yet sex can hardly be said to take place in a social and cultural vacuum.<sup>76</sup> Particularly when we consider young women’s experiences across the sexual violence continuum, it becomes apparent that the social and cultural context in which sex occurs is enormously important and has very real effects. The immediate context and the rules surrounding not only sex but also love, relationships, pleasure and safe-sex practices are all relevant to the negotiation of mutual, reciprocal and consensual sex. Before considering sexual violence in more detail, the next chapter explores these various rules of sexual engagement.

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