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Review Article

Breaking the Silence: Gender Power Imbalances, Stealthing, and the Fight for Sexual Autonomy

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Abstract

In this study, gender inequities and power dynamics influence condom use and other safer sexual practices. Power disparities make women vulnerable to STIs, unwanted pregnancies, and psychological trauma. Stealthing, the non-consensual removal or tampering with condoms during intercourse, illustrates gender inequity in sexual interactions. Stealthing undermines bodily autonomy and has severe physical and psychological effects like sexual violence. Stealthing is common, but legal frameworks don't address it, reflecting social struggles to recognise and confront gender-based violence. Based on feminist viewpoints and Michel Foucault's theories on power and subjectivity, this research shows how power-knowledge interactions affect sexuality and autonomy. Legal reform, societal education, and balanced power dynamics are needed to promote safer, consenting, and healthier sexual relationships.

1. Introduction

In This power disparity ultimately leads to gender disparities in sexual conduct. Men often have more sexual partners than women and historically have had the authority to determine the circumstances of sexual encounters, which can hinder women's ability to effectively discuss and implement safer sexual practices, such as condom use. Power dynamics in sexual interactions greatly influence the significance and understanding of condom use, as well as the decision-making process around condom use.

In a partnership, having higher power or resources to promote condom use can be essential. When one lacks the authority in a relationship to propose using condoms, even if they have a favourable view of condoms, they may

find it challenging to discuss or promote condom use due to the prevailing power imbalances. Condom use can create a barrier to communication, leading individuals to avoid difficult conversations in their relationships, which can reduce condom use.

Women's autonomy in decision-making and negotiation over the time of sexual intercourse and condom use significantly impacts sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Recent research and sociological theories recognise the enduring presence of structural power imbalances in heterosexual sexual interactions. Power disparities impact decisions about contraception, condom use, and the timing of sexual activity. Power in relationships consists of two main

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aspects: 'power to' (the capability to act by one's wishes) and 'power over' (the capacity to enforce one's desires, especially when faced with opposition).¹

A study by Pulerwitz et al. in 2010² indicates that gender-based power disparities may hinder women's negotiation capacity. Subsequent studies utilising the Sexual Relationship Power Scale (SRPS) revealed that women with elevated power levels are five times more inclined to use condoms compared to those with lower power levels consistently. The results validate that power dynamics within relationships significantly influence decision-making related to practising safe sex. Alam and Alldred's³ research focuses on trust and power dynamics in heterosexual relationships, particularly regarding deceitful sexual behaviours like 'stealthings'. Stealthing, the covert act of removing a condom by a partner without consent, is recognised as a type of gender-based violence. This study demonstrates how gender-based inequality influences discussions on safer sex, often leading to women's autonomy in safer sex decisions being compromised.

An imbalance arises in the power dynamics between women engaged in prostitution and their clients due to the significant influence of the client's preferences on condom usage. Despite efforts to promote the significance of using condoms to prevent STIs and HIV/AIDS, only a tiny percentage of women engaged in prostitution are willing to ask clients to use condoms, and some even decline if the customer refuses.

2. Discussion

The Phenomenon of Stealthing and its Implications

The act of stealthing, characterised by the non-consensual removal or alteration of a condom during sexual intercourse⁴, represents a concerning issue that warrants critical examination. This action entails a partner—irrespective of gender—tampering with or compromising a condom without the other partner's awareness or agreement. Various factors drive this behaviour, such as the desire to assert dominance in a relationship by controlling the type of sexual activities, the engagement in risky sexual practices that could result in unintended pregnancies or sexually transmitted infections (STIs), acts of revenge, particularly among those who may carry STIs, a perceived entitlement to reproductive autonomy, especially in heterosexual dynamics where men may feel entitled to biological fatherhood, a pragmatic belief that condom use

reduces sexual pleasure and psychological influences like the fear of losing a partner and the intention to induce pregnancy. Regardless of the varying motivations, the actions taken—such as removing or damaging a condom—result in comparable detrimental effects. It is crucial to differentiate between consensual unprotected sex and situations where consent is either manipulated or misrepresented. In certain instances, the manipulation of condoms takes place well ahead of time, as evidenced by methods showcased in online videos that illustrate discreet approaches to undermine condoms, ultimately compromising their effectiveness in preventing pregnancy or STIs.

Excluding scenarios where a woman wishing to become pregnant falsely asserts the use of hormonal contraception is essential, as these instances stem from distinct motivations and do not align with the concept of stealthing. Stealthing refers to the covert act of removing or altering condoms during sexual intercourse without the consent of the other party. The scope of misconceptions surrounding contraceptive methods goes beyond this definition. Similar to different types of sexual violence, stealing causes considerable physical and psychological damage to its victims. Engaging in unprotected sex presents significant physical consequences, including the potential for unintended pregnancies, the transmission of sexually transmitted infections, and an elevated risk of HIV/AIDS. Victims often undergo psychological experiences characterised by shame, a sense of violation, and a diminished sense of dignity and autonomy—emotional reactions that align closely with those documented among rape survivors. Stealthing and rape both violate a victim's autonomy and subject them to physical dangers they aimed to evade, frequently leading to comparable long-term consequences.

In 1974, psychologists Ann Burgess and Lynda Holmstrom⁵ carried out a study that examined the psychological effects of sexual violence. The findings indicated that rape victims exhibited increased levels of depression, anxiety, fear, and challenges in social and sexual adjustment when contrasted with non-victimised women. A subset of victims exhibited post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), characterised by symptoms that may endure for decades or potentially a lifetime. The symptoms associated with Rape Trauma Syndrome demonstrate the significant psychological impact of sexual violence. The reliability

of Rape Trauma Syndrome has encountered some criticism; however, the National Institute of Mental Health acknowledges that violence has a profound effect on women's mental health, frequently resulting in significant and lasting psychological damage. While stealthing and rape are distinct in their characteristics, both actions violate bodily and sexual autonomy, resulting in comparably severe repercussions for the victims involved.

Presently, there is no legislation that clearly defines stealthing as an illegal act in many jurisdictions. While numerous countries classify sexual violence as a criminal offence, there are distinctions made between sexual violence and rape, often employing terms such as "sexual contact" and "sexual intercourse." This review posits that stealthing ought to be prosecuted under current sexual violence laws, rather than under existing or proposed rape laws; therefore, this section will concentrate solely on sexual violence laws. Moreover, although the laws regarding sexual violence differ across nations, they universally hinge on the presence or absence of consent for the sexual activity involved.

Moreover, obtaining consent during sexual activity is crucial to the sex-positive movement, which seeks to eliminate the stigma and shame associated with all sexual choices. Stealthing, characterised by the non-consensual removal of a condom, presents a serious challenge to the core tenets of the sex-positive movement. Victims often experience feelings of guilt or shame, which undermines efforts to reduce the stigma associated with rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Stealthing, Gender Inequality, and Power Dynamics

Due to their incapacity to use condoms, women in violent relationships are more likely to get HIV or other STIs. In gender disparity partnerships, women typically have no control over their partners' dangerous sexual behaviours, leaving them vulnerable to infection. Male violence increases when women request condoms because it is seen as a challenge to male authority or a sign of distrust. Gender power disparities prevent women from protecting themselves from their partners' sexual risks, increasing HIV or STI transmission.

Unknown rape victims are also in danger of STIs, including HIV. Studies show that men who commit intimate partner violence often engage in high-risk sexual behaviours like unprotected anal sex, sexual relations with intravenous drug users, and

multiple sexual partnerships without condoms, which increase the risk of HIV or STI transmission.

Abused adolescents are also at risk. Over half of teenage girls with HIV or STIs reported intimate relationship violence. STIs are more common in victims of physical and sexual abuse.⁶ Fear of rejecting sex, condom use, or addressing protection, abstinence, or faithfulness increases infection risk. Trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse, has been related to higher-risk sexual behaviours, such as having many sexual partners or sex work, increasing HIV or STI transmission risk. In their essay "Riding the Bull at Gilley's: Convicted Rapists Describe the Rewards of Rape," Diana Scully and Joseph Marolla⁷ claim that some rapists consider sexual violence as a male entitlement: Men have the right to rape. A man should take it if a lady won't. No, women can't refuse. Women are meant for sex. This is their only skill. Some women would rather be beaten but always give in—it's their job."

In *Feminism and the Power of Law*, Carol Smart⁸ claims that women's sexuality is often separated from their identities. The belief that women are responsible for something men value more than themselves and expected to enjoy sex without respect for their autonomy underpins this creation.

The rise of "stealthing," where men remove condoms without their partners' agreement, is also worrying. Studies show that some men consider stealthing as an "art" that enhances sexual pleasure, delivers a thrill of risk, and allows them to "give women what they deserve," related to a conviction in their right to "spread their seed". Contrary to these detrimental images of male entitlement over women's bodies, women often feel violated, confused about their sentiments towards their relationships, and struggle to reconcile rage with affection. One woman said, "He finished inside me. Despite my anger, I fought to reconcile my sentiments of violation with my love for him. I regret ignoring it at the time. I even attempted to be complimentary".⁹

Stealing is portrayed as sexually motivated violence and hegemonic male rule over women's sexuality and reproductive autonomy. However, relationship-related sexual assault demands careful evaluation. Legal institutions sometimes fail to address sexual intimacy. Relying on legal frameworks to settle human relationship complexity reinforces negative dualities like guilty/innocent or standard/deviant and the law's coercive and violent

tendencies. Michel Foucault's power relations and subjectivity theories can help address the concerns above, even though they don't match feminism. Foucault views power as complexly distributed across societal strata, not just in the state. Power is local and heterogeneous, interacting with other connections and allowing individuals to form and resist.¹⁰

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault¹¹ examines how modern disciplinary procedures like imprisonment affect individuality and the human sciences. He uses torture, punishment, and discipline to show how legal and social attitudes towards crime and punishment have changed and how they shape modern people. Foucault¹² believes that power-knowledge relations on the body shape individuality and self-understanding: "When thinking about power mechanisms, I am thinking about its capillary forms, the points where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and inserts itself into their actions, attitudes, discourses, learning processes, and daily lives." Forensic neuroscience may play a pivotal role to develop and refine etiological models of crime-related behaviours.¹³

Power-knowledge relations paradoxically manage people as objects and create specific types of subjectivity. While discipline shapes individuals, it also normalises them. A panoptic society achieves this through surveillance. The "judge of normality" is present in law, education, health, and social services, cautions Foucault. Foucault¹⁴ examines how power-knowledge helps people view themselves as subjects in *The History of Sexuality*. However, he questions why sexuality is typically associated with secret truths about ourselves. Foucault's analysis shows how power mechanisms penetrate private and societal dynamics, questioning prevailing narratives about law, sexuality, and subjectivity.

3. Conclusion

Gender disparities and power dynamics in sexual relationships have a significant impact on sexual and reproductive health. Structured or relational power disparities restrict women's autonomy in negotiating safer sex practices like condom use. This imbalance threatens their physical and mental health. Stealthing illustrates power, gender inequality, and sexual violence. Changing condoms without consent violates bodily autonomy and encourages male domination over women's sexuality and reproductive decisions. Stealthing, like sexual abuse, causes humiliation, pain, and increased vulnerability to STIs and unplanned pregnancies.

Stealing as sexual violence is not adequately addressed by law. Consent and sexual violence legislation offer a framework, but jurisdictional variations hinder their effectiveness. These theories can help solve stealthing, but permission and relational dynamics must be understood.

According to feminism and Foucault's power theories, sexual violence and gender-based inequality are profoundly ingrained in society and relationships. Foucault's view of power as widespread and constructive rather than oppressive illuminates how such interactions form subjectivities and sustain systemic inequality. Stealthing involves legal action and a societal movement towards recognising and abolishing sexual and reproductive power imbalances. Safer, consensual, and healthier sexual relationships require balanced power dynamics and women's autonomy in decision-making. To address sexual relationship inequalities, education, campaigning, legislative reform, and social change are needed.

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