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STUDY: MANY VICTIMS OF PARTNER VIOLENCE EXPERIENCE REPRODUCTIVE COERCION

A groundbreaking study released this week sheds light on a little-recognized form of abuse in which men use coercion and birth control sabotage to cause their partners to become pregnant against their wills. The study, published in the January issue of *Contraception*, finds this kind of reproductive control to be especially common in relationships in which women experience physical or sexual partner violence.

“Pregnancy Coercion, Intimate Partner Violence and Unintended Pregnancy” is the first quantitative examination of the relationship between intimate partner violence, reproductive coercion and unintended pregnancy. It finds that young women and teenage girls often face efforts by male partners to sabotage their birth control or coerce or pressure them to become pregnant – including by damaging condoms and destroying contraceptives. These behaviors, defined as “reproductive coercion,” are often associated with physical or sexual violence. It also finds that among women who experienced both reproductive coercion and partner violence, the risk of unintended pregnancy doubled.

The study was conducted by researchers at the University of California Davis School of Medicine and the Harvard School of Public Health. From August 2008 to March 2009, researchers worked at five reproductive health clinics in Northern California, querying some 1,300 English- and Spanish-speaking 16- to 29-year-old women who agreed to respond to a survey about their experiences. They were asked about birth-control sabotage, pregnancy coercion and intimate partner violence.

Key findings include:

- Approximately one in five young women said they experienced pregnancy coercion and 15 percent said they experienced birth control sabotage;
- Fifty-three percent of respondents said they had experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner; and
- Thirty-five percent of the women who reported partner violence also reported either pregnancy coercion or birth control sabotage.

“Those of us who work to stop dating, domestic and sexual violence have long known that many victims face threats, verbal demands and physical violence designed to interfere with their efforts to use birth control,” said Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF) President Esta Soler. “It is a big part of the reason that women in abusive relationships are at higher risk for unintended pregnancy. This very important study underscores the link between violence and abuse and unintended pregnancy – and the need for providers at reproductive clinics to screen female patients for violence, as well as for pregnancy coercion and birth control sabotage. If we

are serious about reducing unintended pregnancy in this country, we have to do more to stop violence and abuse, and help victims.”

“This study highlights an under-recognized phenomenon where male partners actively attempt to promote pregnancy against the will of their female partners,” said lead author Elizabeth Miller, an assistant professor of pediatrics in the UC Davis School of Medicine and a practitioner at UC Davis Children’s Hospital. “Not only is reproductive coercion associated with violence from male partners, but when women report experiencing both reproductive coercion and partner violence, the risk for unintended pregnancy increases significantly.”

“We have known about the association between partner violence and unintended pregnancy for many years,” said Jay Silverman, the study’s senior author and an associate professor of society, human development and health in the Harvard School of Public Health. “What this study shows is that reproductive coercion likely explains why unintended pregnancies are far more common among abused women and teens.”

Rebecca Levenson, a Senior Policy Analyst in the FVPF’s Health Unit, is a co-author of the new study. It was conducted in collaboration with the FVPF and the Planned Parenthood Shasta Diablo Affiliate.

The FVPF’s *KnowMoreSayMore* initiative is creating a dialogue about birth control sabotage and reproductive coercion, which can result in unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted infections, miscarriage, infertility, coerced abortion, poor birth outcomes including preterm birth and low birth-weight babies, and other serious health problems. *Read stories of women who share their experiences with birth control sabotage and reproductive coercion at www.KnowMoreSayMore.org*