

Does “No” Always Mean No? Gender Differences in Consent Perceptions across the EU

Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World
 Volume 11: 1–4
 © The Author(s) 2025
 Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
 DOI: 10.1177/23780231251351676
srd.sagepub.com



Richard Nennstiel¹ and Sara Möser¹

Abstract

This study examines societal rejection of the rape myth that a woman’s “no” to sex often means “yes” using Flash Eurobarometer 544 data (N = 25,824) across EU member states. Our visualization reveals that women more strongly reject this myth than men in all countries, with significant cross-national variation in rejection levels for both genders. Notably, higher national gender equality correlates with greater rejection of the myth and smaller gender gaps in this rejection. Furthermore, countries with “only yes means yes” rape legislation tend to exhibit higher gender equality and reduced gender differences in rejecting the myth compared to those with force-based definitions. These findings underscore the link between gender equality, legal frameworks, and societal attitudes toward sexual consent, highlighting the importance of holistic policies addressing gender inequalities to combat rape culture.

Keywords

sexual violence, rape myths, gender equality, consent, cross-national analysis

Sexual violence against women in Europe persists as a critical social problem, deeply embedded within enduring gender stereotypes that undermine women’s agency and the legitimacy of their sexual refusal (European Women’s Lobby 2023; Zamfir et al. 2025). Sexist beliefs concerning the necessity of consent for sexual action, notably the rape myth that a woman’s “no” often masks a “yes” (Burt 1980), contribute to rape culture and erect social and institutional obstacles to effective prevention and legal recourse. Sociologically, this phenomenon reflects broader patriarchal power structures, as articulated by feminist scholars who highlight how dominant cultural norms perpetuate gender asymmetries and normalize male sexual entitlement (Connell 1987; Ridgeway 2011; Walby 1989). The importance of addressing these harmful attitudes is increasingly acknowledged within policy frameworks of the European Union (European Institute for Gender Equality 2025). Examining such societal attitudes toward sexual consent offers crucial insights into the complex interplay between gendered cultural frameworks, legal definitions of rape, and the pursuit of gender equality across European nations.

With our data visualization on the prevalence of rape myths (Zamfir et al. 2025) regarding the unambiguity of a woman’s “no” within sexual contexts, we aim to highlight several key points. First, we demonstrate how prevalent

it is for both men and women to reject this rape myth and how this varies between countries. Second, we examine how gender differences in rejecting this statement vary internationally and how these differences correlate with country-specific characteristics, such as gender equality and the legal definition of rape.

To illustrate these points, we utilize data from Flash Eurobarometer 544 (Gender Stereotypes - Violence against Women, European Commission 2025), collected at the end of February 2024, with participation of 25,824 individuals across European Union member states. We analyze the response to the question: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Faced with a sexual proposal, if a woman says ‘no’, she often means ‘yes’ but she is playing ‘hard to get.’” This statement clearly violates the principle of consent. Therefore, we focus on the proportion of respondents who completely disagreed with this statement. For the complete distribution of all responses, see Figure A1 in the supplemental material. We report weighted

¹University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland

Corresponding Author:

Richard Nennstiel, Department of Sociology of Education, University of Bern, Fabrikstrasse 8, Bern, 3012, Switzerland.
 Email: richard.nennstiel@unibe.ch



results, employing the poststratification weights provided by the data distributor. Further details regarding the weighting procedures are provided in the supplemental material.

To quantify national gender equality, we employ the European Union's Gender Equality Index 2024 (ranging from 1 to 100; European Institute for Gender Equality 2025), where a score of 100 indicates full equality. The index is composed of six core domains: work, health, money, knowledge, time, and power, each capturing a key area of gender equality in society.¹ Additionally, we examine rape myth rejection by legal definitions of rape across countries. The legislative framework defines the legal boundaries of sexual violence and consent. As such, it reflects societal norms regarding sexual autonomy in a way that broader gender equality indices, which often aggregate across various domains, may not fully encapsulate. To categorize countries by their legal definitions of rape (at the time of the survey), we utilize and combine different classifications (European Women's Lobby 2023; Zamfir et al. 2025), distinguishing three groups: force-based, no means no, and only yes means yes.²

Figure 1 (A) displays the percentage of men and women in each EU country who completely disagreed with the "no could mean yes" statement. Several insights emerge clearly: First, women across all countries are more likely to reject this statement than men. Second, the level of rejection—by both men and women—varies significantly between countries. There is a general trend indicating higher rejection rates among both genders in countries with higher gender equality.³ Third, notable variations in gender differences in rejection across countries are evident. In Figure 1 (B), we see that gender differences in rejecting this statement diminish with increasing national gender equality. In countries with greater gender equality, men and women show more similar levels of total rejection of the myth. Nevertheless, statistically significant gender differences persist in all countries, with women consistently rejecting the statement at higher rates (by at least 10 percentage points). Thus, we observe both that with increasing gender equality, myth rejection levels among both groups rise and that greater gender equality is associated with a greater convergence between men and women.

¹For an overview of the country gender equality index scores (including the individual subdomains), see Table A1 in the supplemental material.

²For a brief explanation of the typology and the classification of individual countries, see Table A2 in the supplemental material.

³See also Figure A2 in the supplemental material for an alternative representation of the association between myth rejection levels for both genders and gender equality.

Examining country clusters based on the legal definition of rape reveals that countries with higher gender equality tend to have only yes means yes legislation and that countries with force-based definitions have lower gender equality measures (see Figure 1 (B)). Countries characterized by no means no legislation position themselves between these two groups. Regarding rejection of the statement, gender differences tend to be greater in countries with a force-based legislation and smaller in those adopting only yes means yes legislation. Therefore, in countries with similar legislation, we observe that the greater the degree of gender equality, the stronger the convergence between men and women in their rejection of this rape myth. Also see Figure A3 in the supplemental material.

These empirical findings offer significant implications for sociological understanding of rape culture and policy development aimed at eradicating sexual violence. Encouragingly, legal frameworks grounded in affirmative consent (only yes means yes) appear to be associated with reduced gender disparities in societal understandings of consent, suggesting that legal norms can indeed shape cultural attitudes. Our interpretation that legal rape norms influence attitudes regarding sexual consent aligns with research from other fields demonstrating that legal norms can drive cultural change (Aksoy et al. 2020). However, the relationship between legislation and attitudes could also be a two-way street. Laws can drive cultural change by signaling societal values and norms (Bilz and Nadler 2014). Conversely, attitudes also play an important role in shaping the creation, acceptance, and enforcement of laws (Acemoglu and Jackson 2017). This dynamic interplay can also be understood through the lens of modernization theory (Inglehart and Norris 2003), which suggests that as societies modernize and gender equality increases, evolving cultural values can both prompt the development of more progressive legal frameworks and foster greater rejection of traditional norms that underpin harmful attitudes, such as rape myth acceptance. However, the clear link between attitudes toward sexual consent and the level of national gender equality, which remains substantial even when rape legislation is taken into account, highlights the need for holistic policies that address fundamental gender inequalities (Zamfir et al. 2025). From a sociological perspective, this aligns with theories emphasizing the cultural underpinnings of violence against women and the role of gendered norms in its perpetuation (Hearn 1998). This complex interplay between societal attitudes, gender equality, and rape laws, along with their potential interactions, underscores the importance of more in-depth investigation (potentially with a longitudinal perspective) to gain deeper insights into the mechanisms and (causal) inferences regarding their relationship.

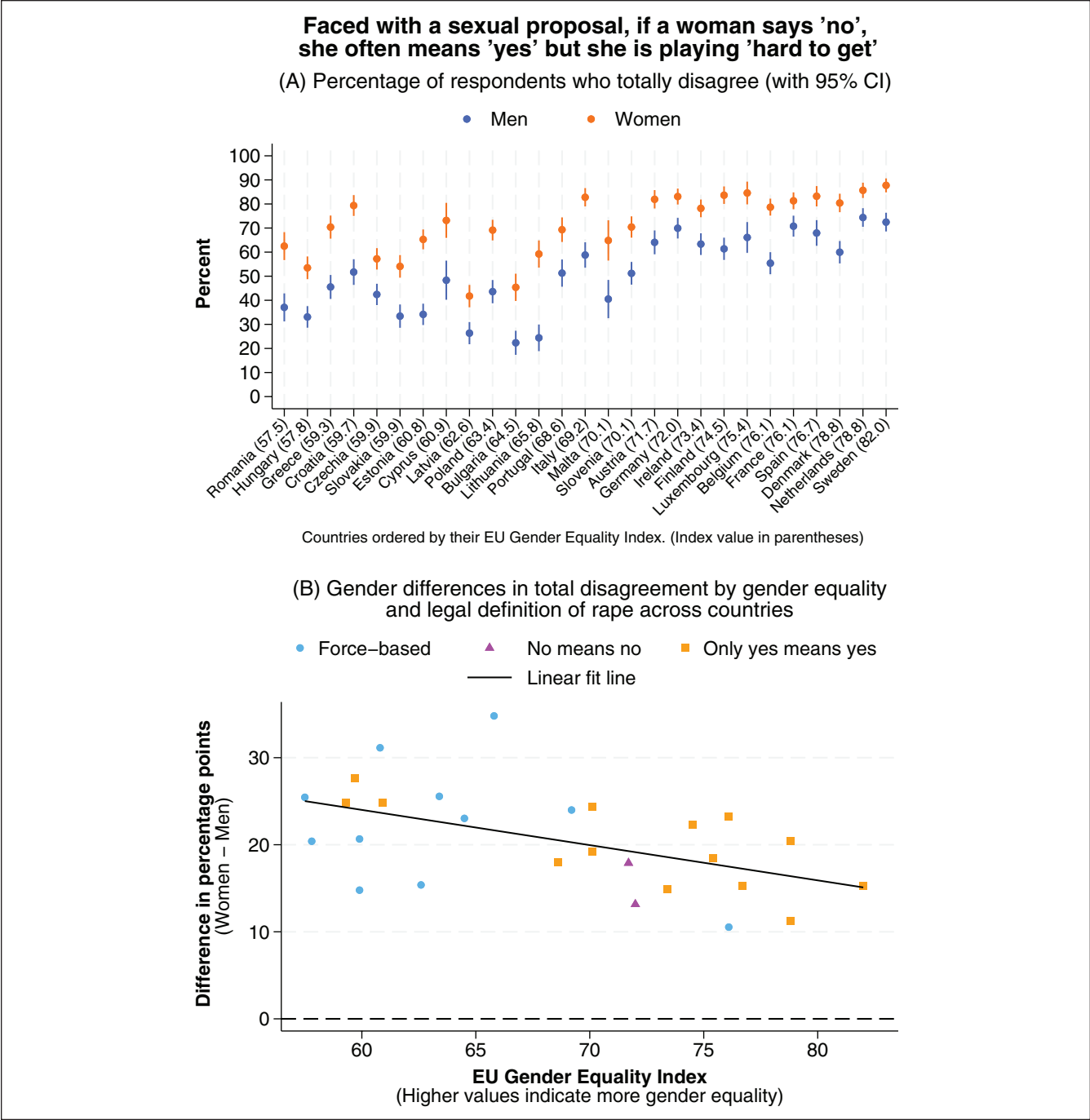




Figure 1. Sexual consent attitudes and gender equality across the European Union.

Source: Flash Eurobarometer 544; weighted data, our own calculations.

Note: The EU Gender Equality Index ranges from 1 to 100, where a score of 100 indicates full equality between men and women. To categorize countries by their legal definitions of rape (at the time of the survey), we follow and combine existing classifications (European Women's Lobby 2023; Zamfir et al. 2025), distinguishing three types: force-based (requiring physical violence or threat), no means no (focusing on nonconsent), and only yes means yes (requiring explicit consent). For the classification of individual countries, see Table A2 in the supplemental material. All differences in Figure 1 (B) are statistically significant ($p < .05$), which is why confidence intervals are not displayed. CI = confidence interval.

ORCID iDs

Richard Nennstiel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8551-2747>
 Sara Möser  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1738-5846>

Data Availability

Because these data are third-party property, we are not permitted to publish them. However, they are publicly accessible to researchers via the GESIS data archive after signing a data usage agreement (https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA8820). The code for reproducing the analyses is available at <https://osf.io/b7k9x/>.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

References

- Acemoglu, Daron, and Matthew O. Jackson. 2017. "Social Norms and the Enforcement of Laws." *Journal of the European Economic Association* 15(2):245–95. doi:10.1093/jeea/jvw006.
- Aksoy, Cevat G., Christopher S. Carpenter, Ralph De Haas, and Kevin D. Tran. 2020. "Do Laws Shape Attitudes? Evidence from Same-Sex Relationship Recognition Policies in Europe." *European Economic Review* 124:103399. doi:10.1016/j.euroecorev.2020.103399.
- Bilz, Kenworthy, and Janice Nadler. 2014. "Law, Moral Attitudes, and Behavioral Change." Pp. 241–67 in *The Oxford Handbook of Behavioral Economics and the Law*, edited by E. Zamir, and D. Teichman. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199945474.013.0010.
- Burt, Martha R. 1980. "Cultural Myths and Supports for Rape." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38(2):217–30.
- Connell, R. W. 1987. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- European Commission. 2025. *Flash Eurobarometer 544 (Gender Stereotypes – Violence against Women)*. GESIS, Köln. ZA8820 Datenfile Version 1.0.0. European Commission, Brussels. doi:10.4232/1.14492.
- European Institute for Gender Equality. 2025. *Gender Equality Index*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Women's Lobby. 2023. "EWL Observatory Analysis of Definitions of Rape in the EU: The Added Value the EU Directive on VAW." <https://womenlobby.org/ewl-observatory-analysis-of-definitions-of-rape-in-the-eu-the-added-value-of/#next>.
- Hearn, Jeff. 1998. "Theorizing Men and Men's Theorizing: Varieties of Discursive Practices in Men's Theorizing of Men." *Theory and Society* 27(6):781–816.
- Inglehart, Ronald, and Pippa Norris. 2003. *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Ridgeway, Cecilia L. 2011. *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199755776.001.0001.
- Walby, Sylvia. 1989. "Theorising Patriarchy." *Sociology* 23(2):213–34. doi:10.1177/0038038589023002004.
- Zamfir, Ionel, Piotr Bąkowski, Micaela Del Monte, Silvia Kotanidis, Maria-Margarita Mentzelopoulou, Hendrik Alexander Mildebrath, and Colin Murphy, et al. 2025. *Definitions of Rape in the Legislation of EU Member States*. In-depth analysis PE 757.618. Contributions from EPRS Country Specialists. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service.

Author Biographies

Richard Nennstiel, DPhil, is a research associate at the Department of Sociology of Education at the University of Bern. His current research interests include social mobility, competence development, school-to-work transitions, and ethnic inequalities.

Sara Möser, DPhil, is a research associate at the Department of Sociology of Education and head of the DAB Panel Study at the University of Bern. Her research focuses on social inequalities in education and the labor market, with a particular emphasis on social background, gender, and migration background.