

Silent or Silenced: Misconceptions and Myths Surrounding Male Victims of Sexual Assault

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Abstract

This study aims to shed light on male victims of sexual assault and their underrepresentation. The majority of sexual assault and violence research to date has focused on women, with little attention to the experiences of male victims. This paper uses a content analysis methodology to bridge this gap and further discuss the causes, effects, and potential solutions of male sexual assaults. It also aims to discuss the historical evolution of male victims' underreporting and invisibility, as well as highlight the gender-based misconceptions and myths surrounding them. The causes and impact of sexual assault on male victims mentally and physically are highlighted, with a focus on the potentially occurring response of ejaculation and erection. Existing laws and policies were investigated within this research to further highlight the need for additional policies and initiatives. Thus, the key policies to increase the visibility of male victims of sexual assault were discussed, such as promoting education and awareness, fostering a safe environment, and encouraging collaboration between different stakeholders. This study proposes the use of gender-inclusive language that could potentially reduce the stigma and marginalization of male victims. Ultimately, the proposed approach recommends a comprehensive strategy that addresses misconceptions, dismantles the barriers of underreporting, and fosters a more inclusive discourse on sexual assault that supports all survivors, irrespective of gender.

Introduction

Male victims of Sexual Assault (SA) face an omnipresent societal silence, characterized by misconceptions and stereotypes, resulting in a continuous culture of disbelief, stigma, and marginalization. Myths and unsupported beliefs about masculinity and male sexuality are common within the legal realm, the healthcare domain, as well as among agencies catering to individuals affected by SA. The frequent perceptions include the assumptions that men should be masculine enough to avoid SA and that they are responsible for their assaults (Bullock & Beckson, 2011). The latter believe that male victims are less traumatized and distressed by the assault than their female

counterparts, an assumption attributed in part to the misconception that ejaculation after the assault is an indication of a positive erotic experience. Furthermore, Peterson et al. (2011) discussed the common-held myths suggesting that men cannot be victims of SA, and that if they are victims, they are unscathed by it. This skepticism extends beyond the immediate trauma that male victims experience, intertwining into the complex fabric of gender roles and expectations, and conserving the detrimental stereotypes about masculinity and vulnerability.

The predominating societal attitudes towards male victims of SA leads, therefore, to gender inequality, since they reinforce a culture that promotes gender norms by limiting the freedom of all individuals and undermining their rights and dignity. In other words, violating the human rights of male survivors is impeding progress toward true gender equality. The emergence of this problem into the scope of this research has been propelled by the underreporting of male survivors of SA, the lack of appropriate measures and services, and the minimal legal redress. The collective efforts of researchers, clinicians, and advocacy organizations have played a crucial role in bringing male victims of SA to the forefront of public and national discussions notably after an extended period of neglect and marginalization (Wingender & Olesen, 2023). This increased focus is significant for a more comprehensive understanding of SA and to ensure that male victims are recognized, validated, and addressed within the broader conversation on sexual violence.

The definition of male SA and the extent of its underreporting varies widely across different studies, stakeholders, and organizations. Legal advocates for change perceive the issue as resulting from a systemic deficiency in validating the trauma experienced by male victims, aiming to secure equal legal protection. However, stakeholders opposing change view the legal framework that does not support men being victims of SA as sufficient and define the issue as an exception, potentially undermining its prevalence and impact on male survivors. On the other hand, clinical definitions of male rape might be more inclusive by emphasizing the overlap between sexual assaults and rape that could include non-penetrative acts (Rentoul & Appleboom, 1997). Furthermore, public officials endorsing change may define the issue as a threat to society requiring policies to ensure the mental and physical well-being of individuals. Conversely, officials opposing change might undermine the SA of men as less urgent when compared to other prevalent issues within their jurisdiction.

Additionally, supportive religious institutions may define the issue as a humanitarian concern, thus reducing the spread of its negative consequences by offering compassion and support to all survivors regardless of gender. Nonetheless, some religious institutions relate SA to the traditional gender norms and overlook male victims since their reports conflict with societal and religious norms. Different stakeholders may elicit various perspectives on key values (Rentoul & Appleboom, 1997). First, concerning equity, legal and public officials prioritize legal equity, while religious institutions focus on ethical equity. Second, in terms of efficiency, businesses emphasize the workplace environment and dynamics, whereas legal stakeholders prioritize the legal processes. Third, security wise, public officials emphasize the societal well-being of individuals, while the security of victims within the legal system is the emphasis of legal stakeholders.

Lastly, concerning liberty, religious institutions prioritize religious freedom, whereas businesses might emphasize promoting a workplace environment that allows individuals to exercise personal liberties. This diversity in values highlights the challenges of addressing SA across diverse stakeholders. The underlying value conflict revolves around the societal norms, traditional beliefs and myths related to gender roles in society and masculinity. This conflict may materialize as different stakeholders might define SA in accordance with their values, possibly hindering comprehensive efforts to address this issue.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is content analysis involving the examination and interpretation of different sources and studies to extract valuable and accurate information for a nuanced understanding of male SA by identifying patterns. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the definition of SA and its causes and effects on male survivors. Examining the literature on the overarching subject of male SA elicits several challenges. Notably, there is a lack of well-validated measurements specifically designed to assess men's encounters with sexual assault. In this sense, researchers differ widely in their definitions of male SA, with some encompassing various terminologies to label coerced or nonconsensual sexual behaviors.

Literature Review

Historical Evolution and Causes

This study aims to tackle the misconceptions and disbeliefs behind male victims of SA, list its causes and the detrimental consequences resulting from its occurrence, as well as mention key policies and recommendations that can further instill positive change. First, there have been confusion and misconceptions behind the definition of male sexual assault. Until the earlier years of the 1980s, many states' rape statutes in the United States identified rape as forced sexual intercourse involving nonconsensual vaginal penetration. Moreover, before the 1994 amendment to the Sexual Offences Act 1956, the legal definition of rape in the United Kingdom also specifically comprised non-consenting vaginal penetration cases (Bullock & Beckson, 2011). Thus, according to many legal definitions back then, men could not be victims of SA, and their cases were covered under the legal statute of buggery or indecent assault, which has a considerably inferior penalty than rape. To illustrate, the sentence for rape, in the case of a perpetrator against a female victim, was life imprisonment, while for indecent assault, in the case of a perpetrator against a male victim, the sentence was 10 years in prison (Rentoul & Appleboom, 1997).

Furthermore, it was not until 2012 that the Department of Justice updated the definition of rape from "carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will" to "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the victim's consent," thus including any gender of victim and offender (Thomas & Kopel, 2023, p. 3). Additionally, in 2020, the Department of Justice included verbal threats and attacks involving unwanted sexual contact between the victim and perpetrator in their definition of SA. The relatively recent recognition of men being victims of SA and rape is the main cause behind the misunderstandings of male victims of SA within society.

There are a plethora of reasons and factors behind the underreporting of male victims of SA. First, due to the patriarchal society dominated by male perspectives on sexuality, there are misconceptions that men are inherently sexually assertive, robust, and unaffected by abuse (Bullock & Beckson, 2011; Rentoul & Appleboom, 1997). These misguided beliefs hinder the recognition and support of male survivors of SA. Second, it has been highlighted that male victims of SA believe that their masculinity is threatened, and the shame and vulnerability that come from a compromised sense of manhood impede victims from acknowledging that they have been assaulted. It is suggested that male victims may consider themselves as non-fitting to the stereotypical SA victim and are usually ashamed of admitting that they were sexually assaulted (Wingender & Olesen, 2023).

Third, one of the main causes behind the underreporting of sexual assault of men is denial and psychological manipulation. Following a sexual assault perpetrated by a woman, men may perceive the experience as a consensual sexual encounter and fail to recognize the violation of their will (Peterson et al., 2011). The delayed acknowledgment of being sexually assaulted is frequent among male victims due to their confusion on how to interpret the incident. This limited understanding is formed due to societal misconceptions, where the perpetrator is a woman, and the sexual intercourse outcome may obscure men from comprehending their victimization experiences as instances of sexual assault. Moreover, there is a persistent belief that men are responsible for their own sexual assaults, as they are perceived to have desired and allowed it to occur despite being able to defend themselves (Wingender & Olesen, 2023). Thus, male victims usually face more blame than female victims when they lack the ability to protect themselves and cease the assault. McLean (2013) addressed this further by highlighting that the more an individual believes in masculine myths and perceptions, the more they will blame the victim for the crime and defend the perpetrator.

Impact of Sexual Assault on Male Victims

The misguided perceptions and skepticism toward male victims of SA bear numerous detrimental consequences. Male victims may experience irritability, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Wingender & Olesen, 2023). Additionally, reactions post-SA, such as withdrawal, attempted suicide, and avoidance behavior, are also common among male survivors. Furthermore, Littleton et al. (2020) have demonstrated that male victims of SA expressed more depressive symptoms and engaged in more drinking and tobacco use than their non-victimized peers. In addition to these mental health and behavioral consequences, one of the most potentially occurring reactions while being sexually assaulted is the erection and ejaculation by the male victim. It has been demonstrated that these physiological responses are not under intentional control and management but are rather incited by high anxiety or anal stimulation (Bullock & Beckson, 2011; McLean, 2013; Rentoul & Appleboom, 1997).

A male victim's arousal or experience of an ejaculation during a SA is incorrectly interpreted as implying consent. This misinterpretation suggests that the victim found pleasure in the assault. For example, a judge in the United Kingdom dismissed a case of prison rape because the victim had admitted to having an erection during the assault. Another additional defendant was free from the charges of forcible sodomy

because the victim was aroused during the assault, and it was considered a defense of submission (Bullock & Beckson, 2011). In addition to the false implication, the erection and ejaculation, because of their misattribution, increase the sense of guilt of the victim. Moreover, male victims of SA fear being perceived as gay or less masculine because of the arousal, and might also internalize these judgments. As a result, the distress of questioning their own sexuality contributes to feelings of self-loathing and homophobia.

Policies and Recommendations

Gorris (2015) argued that the policies implemented against violence and SA only pertain to women. The author stated that the interdiction on torture is explicitly stated in gender-neutral human rights instruments, such as the UN General Assembly's Convention Against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, applicable to both men and women. In contrast, gender-based violence finds specific codification in the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, limiting its focus to women only. Although the term 'gender-based violence' might suggest inclusivity, within international human rights law, it solely discusses female victimization. Moreover, the frequent interchangeable use of 'sexual assault' and 'gender-based violence' in UN documents, the literature, and NGO discussions emphasizes the perception that these issues exclusively pertain to female victims, which in turn renders the victimization of men and boys less visible, under-researched, and under-addressed.

However, there has been progress in shedding light on male victims of SA and raising awareness. Notably, in June 2013, a new Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Resolution (2106) was adopted, and it was the first time in a WPS resolution that men and boys were explicitly mentioned (United Nations, 2013). Additionally, the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict organized a UN Forum singularly dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding of male victims of sexual violence. Still, despite progress in the implementation of these new resolutions, male victims are still seen as secondary victims by most instruments, which not only undermines their suffering but also reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. For example, the groundbreaking Resolution 2106 reads:

Noting with concern that sexual violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations disproportionately affects women and girls, as well as groups that are particularly vulnerable or may be specifically targeted, while also affecting men and boys and those secondarily traumatized as forced witnesses of sexual violence against family members. (United Nations, 2013, p. 6)

Despite the representation and visibility of male victims, they can clearly be identified as secondary to women and girls. This categorization might reinforce gender stereotypes and conceptualize men as perpetrators and women as victims, focusing on notions of hegemonic masculinity and marginalizing male victims of SA. Indeed, values such as equity, efficiency, security, and liberty play a crucial role in shaping policies related to sexual assault on male victims. The lack of support and justice mechanisms for male victims hinders the progress in raising awareness and protecting male victims of SA, rendering less equity between genders. For example, Thomas and

Kopel (2023) indicated that male victims sought help at rape-crisis centers because of their lack of knowledge of alternative options.

Furthermore, the efficiency of swift assistance to male victims is rather inefficient. Thomas and Kopel (2023) have demonstrated that only 5% of rape-crisis centers are equipped to fulfill male victim needs, having insufficient resources and inappropriate staff. In addition, male victims sometimes feel unsafe in admitting the occurrence of the crime, solely because they are worried about their masculinity perceptions of others and sexuality. The responses and reactions of the victim's family and friends might lead victims to remain silent about their assault. Additionally, law enforcement is not equipped properly to assess the conditions of a male victim of SA, which renders male victims unsafe and unprotected (Thomas & Kopel, 2023).

The policies to increase the reporting of male SA, and reduce the misconceptions and myths regarding it, include collaboration among stakeholders who can address the needs of male victims. Fostering a more supportive environment can be achieved by promoting awareness and education to challenge stereotypes and reduce the stigma associated with male victims. Inclusive policies to recognize the diverse experiences of victims are essential and can involve providing training for law enforcement and ensuring gender-neutral support services. Thus, adequate funding and allocation of resources for support organizations would benefit victims of all genders and preserve the rights of all individuals. Essentially, inclusive language could potentially reduce the stigma and marginalization of male victims of sexual assault. New policies focusing on the implementation of gender-neutral language in high-level political and non-political documents are needed. Referring to male and female victims as "victims" and "individuals" could potentially alleviate the marginalization and further emphasize the severity of the crime rather than the gender of the victim. These policy recommendations aim to balance the stakeholders' different interests and create a comprehensive and adequate approach to address sexual assault involving male victims while promoting gender equality.

Conclusion

Sexual assault against male victims is profoundly significant in the context of gender discrimination, challenging predefined notions and stereotypes. A comprehensive approach including different policies and strategies is essential to instill positive change. Promoting education and gender-encompassing awareness campaigns and policy reforms represent essential steps toward progress. The prevailing misconception that SA solely affects females undermines the urgency for inclusive policies addressing the experiences of male victims. While existing policies, such as those mentioned above, are essential within the framework of human rights instruments, a critical evaluation is imperative. A nuanced and gender-inclusive policy framework should be developed, providing explicit support for male victims in order to alleviate stereotypes and encourage the reporting of such crimes.

In conclusion, tackling gender discrimination and reaching gender equality in the context of male SA requires a multifaceted approach. Beyond policy considerations, societal attitudes play a crucial role. Misconceptions, myths, and underrepresentation can be dispelled by instilling change at both individual and community levels.

A comprehensive strategy that addresses misconceptions, educates and promotes awareness among the public, and refines policies is pivotal for achieving meaningful yet lasting change for male victims of sexual assault to not be silent nor silenced.

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