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Understanding male sexual victimization: An expository synthesis

By

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### **Abstract**

Sexual victimization is typically analyzed in our society through a gender-based lens, with the typecast scenario being that of a female victim and male offender. Because of this, male sexual victimization has been severely understudied, with many believing it is less common than it actually is. This lack of research and stigma surrounding the topic has severe consequences for male victims, who often face the same challenges in recovery as female victims, but with an added layer of complexity. Sexual scripts, gender roles, and male rape myths all contribute to this issue by framing women as “ideal victims” and minimizing the plight of men after being victimized. This thesis examines preconceived notions about male victimization present in our society and where they come from, thus seeking to bring attention to the issue. This research was not with the goal of diminishing the issues and stigma that female victims face, but to recognize the additional challenges for male victims, in an effort to acknowledge the potential need for gender neutral interventions following assault.

## **Understanding Male Sexual Victimization: An Expository Synthesis**

Sexual violence can affect anyone of any age or gender. However, in reality, our culture still does not accept this as truth. As a society, we have a typecast idea of sexual assault victims, typically assuming young, vulnerable women as the main targets of this kind of abuse. Although we have this cliché of sorts present in contemporary society, there is still no hesitation to victim blame women who have been victimized based on rape culture ideologies stemming from years of misogynist oppression and androcentrism. Thankfully, our culture has been evolving into one where victims are at the forefront and these rape culture myths are being debunked.

Nevertheless, throughout these conversations, there is a category of victims that are largely disregarded. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), one out of every 10 rape victims is male (2021). Men and boys who have been victimized in such a manner experience a lot of the same effects other survivors do, such as shame, guilt, and PTSD, but they also face challenges that are distinctive of being a male in our culture. While it is true that men benefit from male privilege, they are also left exposed to the harmful effects of toxic masculinity when they experience traumatic events such as a sexual assault. Western society tends to discredit male victims of sexual assault through their expectations of perpetrators and toxic masculinity ideals.

Relevant scholarship aids in recognizing how deeply rooted stereotypes about men and broader gender norms foster a culture that neglects male victims and leaves them unprotected. Traditional gender stereotypes expect men to be emotionless (except to express anger or aggression), strong, and hypersexual. There is increasing evidence that adherence to gender stereotypes can put males at higher risk of being sexually victimized and can also affect how males deal with the consequences of the victimization and whether they decide to even report it.

Men have historically benefitted from gender roles and norms, but the oppression caused by these is beginning to come to light with the growing awareness of how they can work against victims. Our demeanors towards and expectations of victims of any gender almost always directly relate to gender norms (Mankowski & Maton, 2010). Masculinity has, without a doubt, been a tool for advancement of males in our society, but it is also a prominent oppressor for male victims of sexual assault. Utilizing a literature review methodology, this paper will explore whether contemporary society has a problem with presuppositions regarding male victims of sexual assault and where this expectancy issue comes from, as well as how it contributes to the discrediting of male survivors.

### **Gender Norms**

Sex and gender play a tremendous role in our lives from the day we are born. Being a cisgender woman or man comes with many distinguishing factors and expectations that can vary depending on culture. These gender expectations are learned through direct and indirect means. Being male comes with a dimension of power (Mankowski & Maton, 2010) that is largely regarded as an advantage for male presenting persons. However, there is a paradox that is visible when examining this privilege through the lens of male sexual victimization. Men enjoy social and economic privilege over women as a group and are at the top of power structures in most cultures but this privilege does not come without a cost. While it is easier to identify the damage that male privilege does to women, men are also harmed by this power structure and the socialization processes necessary to maintain it (Mankowski & Maton, 2010). Male privilege serves men until it doesn't. Meaning, as long as a man has not had any experiences incompatible with what it means to be a "real man", then they will continue to benefit from these advantages. An experience incongruous with our societal definitions of masculinity, such as sexual

victimization, highlights this incompatibility both in societal reactions and how victims themselves respond to these experiences.

“The masculine gender role is expected to be independent, assertive, dominant, and competitive in social and sexual relations” (Sleath & Bull, 2010, p. 973). These characteristics that are typically associated with masculinity are also linked to various social and health problems such as heart disease and intimate partner violence (Mankowski & Maton, 2010). These links are not necessarily fully dependent on the mere existence of gender roles. Rather, the extent to which men as individuals choose to subscribe to these beliefs and endorse traditional behaviors pertaining to masculinity is what determines outcomes (Mankowski & Maton, 2010). In addition to affecting health outcomes, Depraetere et al. (2021), found that higher conformity to traditional gender norms not only puts men at risk of being victimized, but also contributes to a distorted sense of themselves as victims, in which their recognition of themselves as such is delayed. The expectations of the masculine gender role that we hold and teach as a society discourage male victims of sexual assault from speaking up about their experiences. Survivor accounts in various studies have found that men who have been sexually victimized will often avoid speaking up for fear of being labeled “weak” or not “manly enough” (Sleath & Bull, 2010; Weiss, 2010; Walker et al., 2005). Cultural expectations of hegemonic masculinity have created an environment in which there is no room for men to be vulnerable or accepted as victims.

There is also a stigma that comes with the word “victim” that further exacerbates the perceived incompatibility of identifying as male and also identifying as a victim. Being a victim usually means you have lost something and is synonymous with pain and often weakness (Javaid, 2017). The gender expectations that we have for men in our society completely clash with the implications of being a victim. This incongruence often makes men hesitant to want to

use the label of “victim” to describe themselves. The reluctance to accept status as a victim after an attack such as sexual assault can lead to “isolation or an ‘identity crisis’” (Javaid, 2017, p. 331) in which men have trouble conceptualizing their place in society because of the aforementioned contradictions of traditional masculinity and popular ideas of who we consider capable of being a victim.

Sexual scripts also play a crucial role in male victim’s perceptions of their own attacks. Popular gender norms dictate that men need sex and want it all the time. In addition, “persistent cultural scripts regarding (hetero)sexuality... cast men as sexual initiators and women as gatekeepers responsible for restraint” (Weiss, 2010, p. 287). These sexual scripts add another layer of intricacy to the intersection of gender norms and male victimization. Men are traditionally pursuers of sex and women are the gatekeepers. These ideas regarding each gender’s place in sexual situations are completely overturned when men are the victims in a situation involving unwanted sexual contact. Again, this contributes to men’s ability to perceive themselves as victims. This is especially true when the perpetrator is female. Although research on female perpetrators of sexual assault is lacking, there is evidence to support that men are even more reluctant to admit that they did not want to have sex with a woman or that they were coerced or forced into sex with a woman for fear that their status as heterosexual will be brought into question as well as their overall masculinity (Weiss, 2010). The idea of a man not wanting to have sex at any opportunity does not fit into the mold of heterosexual sexual scripts.

Furthermore, gender norms and sexual scripts that are ingrained in our culture also impact the ability of law enforcement and larger communities to acknowledge sexual violence against men as “real crimes” (Weiss, 2010; Rumney, 2009). This again highlights the paradoxical nature of male privilege. While men do benefit from their gender economically and socially in

some ways, they also may find themselves facing backlash if they come forward as victims of sexual violence. Heterosexual men who are attacked by female perpetrators may even be ridiculed for suggesting that a woman could coerce them into sex (Weiss, 2010). Moreover, even unwanted advances by women may lead male victims to experience “status enhancement” (Weiss, 2010; Mankowski & Maton, 2010) because these advances from the opposite sex demonstrate male desirability and their value in society as determined by traditional masculinity.

From a young age, men are socialized to be strong, tough, and self-sufficient. Disclosing vulnerabilities and acknowledging feelings are antithetical to traditional masculinity and masculine roles. Higher conformity to traditional masculine gender roles has been linked to increased odds of sexual victimization for men (Depraetere et al., 2021). This conformity, in combination with myths about male sexual victimization, creates instances in which men may have been victimized but are unwilling or unable to accept it, especially in cases where the perpetrator is female (Depraetere et al., 2021).

### **Rape Myths**

Rape myths affect both males and females and they can have extremely detrimental effects on the healing of victims and even their decision to report their attack. Rape myths are “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, or rapists” (Kassing & Prieto, 2003). These false beliefs still hold a tremendous amount of power in our society. They are dangerous because they can contribute to the victim's feelings of self-blame or shame. Some rape myths regarding female victims are that: women who are intoxicated or dressed provocatively and are raped deserved it, women lie about sexual assault for revenge or regret for having sex with someone, and if she did not say “no” or scream or fight, then it was not actually rape (Depraetere et al., 2021). These are just to name a few. Of course, all of these myths are false and



based on extremely outdated ideas and understandings of the experiences of victims of sexual assault. Parallels exist between rape myths pertaining to women and male rape myths.

Acceptance of these myths by individuals is related to the level of adherence to gender role stereotypes (Kassing & Prieto, 2003).

### **Male Rape Myths**

Rape myths about females are tied more to purity and sexuality, both notions that heavily play into the stereotypes that accompany being a woman in our society. In the case of male rape myths, there are six identifiable categories that are widely accepted in the literature. As is the case with female rape myths, male rape myths are also closely tied to gender expectations and norms. The six categories of male rape myths “all acknowledge and perpetuate the hegemonic masculine and heteronormative nature... of society as a whole” (Ralston, 2020, p. 128). The most common male rape myths include: men cannot be raped, men are inherently sexual beings so they cannot be targets of sexual assault, men who are victimized lose their masculinity, being a man makes it inherently easier to cope with victimization, male rape is rare, and sexual victimization of men is limited to certain settings such as prison (Ralston, 2020). In addition to these six categories, Walfield also found that it is widely accepted that only gay men can be both the perpetrators and victims of rape, as well as that physical responses from male bodies at the time of unwanted sexual advances are often seen as a justification for why a man being a victim of rape is not possible (2021). Traditional gender ideologies and the hegemonic construction of masculinity directly correlate to these myths surrounding male sexual victimization. Hegemonic masculinity is “the ideal construction of masculinity” (Ralston, 2020, p. 129). It can change over time and throughout societies but generally involves the same characteristics that were briefly discussed in the gender norms section. Hegemonic masculinity usually prescribes men as

needing to be “strong, heterosexual... always ready for sex and... devoid of emotion” (Ralston, 2020, p. 129).

### ***Men Cannot be Raped***

Without question, the most prominent male rape myth in our society states that men cannot be raped (Walfield, 2021). This belief is only justified and further exacerbated by the previously discussed notions of traditional masculinity. The archetype of what makes a “real” man is all-consuming in our society. A real man is strong, aggressive, and cannot be a victim (Mankowski & Maton, 2010). Thus, a real man, should be able to defend himself from any unwanted sexual advances. “Stereotypical aspects of masculinity contend that men are heterosexual, strong, powerful, and unable to be sexually dominated” (Ralston, 2020, p. 129). These stereotypes imply that men cannot be forced to have sex against their will. This is false as any individual can be forced or coerced into sex against their will. Simply not wanting to have sex or not being able to give fully informed consent can constitute a sexual assault (Ralston, 2020).

### ***Hypersexualization***

Men are often hypersexualized in our society (Ralston, 2020). There is a pervasive idea that men are sexually insatiable and this is widely visible in popular culture and media. This idea, coupled with the stereotype that men are in general stronger than women, serve as grounds to make exceptions to accepting male victimization. Men are seen as being inherently sexual beings, therefore it is assumed by many that they cannot be targets of sexual assault, especially when perpetrated by women.

Media, especially film, seems to be especially prone to ridiculing male sexual assault, particularly when the victim is a man and the attacker is a woman. The aforementioned

stereotypes of male hypersexuality and strength make it unfathomable that a man would somehow not want to consent to sex with a woman or that he could be incapable of fighting off a female aggressor if he did not want sex (Ralston, 2020). This kind of thinking has led to a double standard trope in popular media of female on male rape. On the one hand, men raped by attractive women are always considered “lucky” in these kinds of scenarios, while men raped by “ugly” women are simply in a scenario that is ripe for jokes and considered comedy gold. Examples of the lucky man trope are visible in blockbuster films such as *Wedding Crashers* (Dobkin, 2005), *Get Him to the Greek* (Stoller, 2010), and perhaps most disturbingly in *That’s My Boy* (Anders, 2012), in which the victim of assault is a child and the perpetrator is the typecast “hot female teacher”. *That’s My Boy* plays the whole situation for laughs, presenting it as a subplot and even implying that the encounter was consensual. These are just a few examples of films with this trope, where the list is endless. The existence of this kind of media showcases how accepting our society is of this male rape myth, to the point of turning it into a popular comedic trope. In the eyes of popular culture, men cannot be raped, so using this material for comedy is perfectly acceptable. These problematic tropes are not even questioned in film, where one has to wonder if they would be found as amusing if women were the victims portrayed instead.

### ***Victimized Men Lose Their Masculinity***

The myths that men who are victimized lose their masculinity and that being a man makes it easier to cope with being assaulted encourage us to circle back to the societal gender norms that are in place for men. A man being victimized contradicts everything we think we know as a society about masculinity. “A survivor who cannot fight back may be seen to be homosexual, or less of a man” (Ellis, 2002, p.35). These prevalent ideas have serious

consequences for male victims. Male rape survivors do not always seek help unless the physical trauma is severe enough (Ellis, 2002). Men may have trouble accepting that they have been victimized because of popular ideas of masculinity. Coming forward with an experience of sexual assault may lead to the victim's sexuality being questioned and this can happen in cases where the perpetrator is male as well as in cases where the perpetrator is female. If the victim experienced arousal during an assault perpetrated by a homosexual male, this may lead to them questioning their own sexuality and thus lessen their desire to seek out help because of this internal conflict (Ellis, 2002). Likewise, if the victim experienced arousal during an assault perpetrated by a female, then they may be hesitant to come forward at all because if they were aroused that may be taken as a sign that they enjoyed themselves (Ellis, 2002). Men do not lose their masculinity if they are victimized in this manner. Despite this, male survivors of assault may fear that their sexuality and masculinity will be questioned, leading them to stay quiet about their experience. In our society, losing your masculinity is seen as having more significant implications than getting help for a traumatic event such as a sexual assault. Androcentrism has had the effect of both putting men at the top in terms of economic and social status, but it also has the unintended consequence of silencing survivors.

### ***Being Male Makes it Easy to Cope***

Once more, ideas of how men should act and be in our culture have led to the adoption of the notion that men are inherently better equipped to cope with traumatic experiences such as sexual assault. There is a differentiation that needs to be made between our gendered expectations of coping with trauma and the reality of these emotional injuries. The difficulties experienced by men after a sexual assault have been found to be similar to those experienced by women who have suffered sexual violence (Kassing & Prieto, 2003). Increased vulnerability,

anger, loss of self-respect, emotional distance from others, sexual dysfunction, rape-related phobia, and PTSD are things that both genders may experience after an assault (Kassing & Prieto, 2003). In addition, men who are victimized have a higher likelihood of sustaining more physical injuries in an assault, experiencing an assault by more than one assailant, and seeking medical attention for injuries without actually reporting rape (Kassing & Prieto, 2003). Both male and female victims of sexual violence face internalized blame attitudes as well as societal victim blaming attitudes based on rape myths (Kassing & Prieto, 2003). In addition, men may also face the “second assault” (Ellis, 2002) that many women also encounter if they decide to report their attack to proper authorities. The term “second assault” refers to secondary victimization or trauma that takes place in “environments in which he should feel safe” (Ellis, 2002, p. 36). This is also known as “sanctuary trauma” (Ellis, 2002). Unfortunately, even the people working in emergency departments, police stations, or anywhere that could be a sanctuary for a person who has just been sexually assaulted, may still subscribe to rape myths and potentially further victimize the survivor. Furthermore, many sexual assault services are oriented towards female survivors and may even be for women only, which, although necessary, also further alienates male survivors (Ellis, 2002). This cements the fact that because men are expected to be tougher does not mean that they are inherently better equipped to deal with such a traumatic event as being sexually victimized. Just as in the case of female survivors, they also have significant hurdles standing in their way when it comes to reporting or even wanting to report.

### ***Male Rape is Rare***

The myth that male rape is rare contributes to both the issue of perceptions of male survivors, as well as discouraging survivors to report their attacks. In reality, about 1 in 33, or 3

percent, of American men, have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their life (RAINN, 2021). This statistic refutes the popular idea that men do not or cannot be sexually assaulted. 1 in 33 men is a significant statistic, yet there is nearly nothing our society denies more than the fact that men can be victims of sexual assault. Except for the occasional prison rape joke or portrayal in a movie (as comedy), male rape is denied in our society for the most part despite its prevalence. The number of males who are victimized in this manner may also be higher and we may never know because of lack of reporting due to these rape myths and gender stereotypes that govern our lives. There is also this prevalent idea that male sexual assault is limited to certain settings, particularly prison (Kassing et al., 2005). However, many studies have shown that men can be victimized anywhere (Weiss, 2010; Walker et al., 2005; O'Donohue et al., 2003).

### ***Victimization and Sexuality***

The intersection of sexuality and victimization is also undeniable. Many people believe that only gay men can perpetrate and be victims of sexual assault (Walfield, 2021). This creates distinct experiences and conflicts for heterosexual and gay men alike. For heterosexual men, sexual assault can cause confusion or cause them to question their sexuality. There is a widespread belief that only gay men can be assaulted because (in the eyes of society), they do not follow the traditional gender roles of heterosexual men such as being strong and able to fight an attacker (Weiss, 2010). Because of this belief, heterosexual survivors often question their sexuality and believe that they must be gay or will become gay if they were assaulted (Rumney, 2009). This is true of both assaults perpetrated by men and those perpetrated by women. In the case of assaults perpetrated by men, victims often feel conflicted if they were not able to fight

back and in those with female perpetrators, the questioning of sexuality may come from not enjoying the experience and being unable to identify as a victim (Rumney, 2009).

In the case of gay men, sexual assault can lead to self-blaming and self-loathing feelings about their own sexuality. “The combination of sexual victimization and negative societal attitudes towards homosexuality does raise the question of whether gay male rape victims are subjected to a form of double victimization” (Rumney, 2009, p. 233). There is already homophobic sentiment that exists in our society that exacerbates internal conflicts gay men may have about their sexuality. Victim blaming in cases of gay, male survivors may be aggravated by false presumptions of gay men as promiscuous and more likely to engage in “risky” sexual behaviors (Sleath & Bull, 2010). These ideas may also affect internal blame that victims feel, leading them to believe that they somehow deserved to be assaulted for their sexual orientation (Rumney, 2009). Additionally, more blame and pleasure is attributed to gay victims because of the supposition that gay men want to be raped, provoke their assaults, or somehow are less harmed by sexual assault because they are gay (Rumney, 2009). Gay men may hesitate to report an assault to anyone for fear of being victim-blamed, not believed, or facing intolerance (Rumney, 2009). There is evidence to suggest that after being victimized, gay men face difficulties in securing professional and appropriate treatment by the criminal justice system due to the fact that many justice professionals subscribe to the myth that gay men cannot be raped (Rumney, 2009). Gay men have their experiences of rape taken less seriously and this affects the likelihood of other victims to come forward and report their assaults. Sometimes, sexual assaults of gay men are a form of “gay bashing”, motivated by homophobia (Ralston, 2020). In these instances, the assault is more about power and control than sexual gratification (this is true of

other assaults as well) and these may lead to more victim blaming attitudes because perpetrators suggest that victims deserved to be assaulted because of their sexuality (Rumney, 2009).

Sexual assault is in no way related to the sexual orientation of the perpetrator or the survivor. Additionally, being abused or assaulted in this manner will not change your sexual orientation. Confusion about sexuality after an assault is understandable, especially if there was a physiological reaction or arousal, but this does not mean that the victim “liked” being assaulted (Sleath & Bull, 2010). These intersections of sexual orientation and gender identity are mostly results of stigma against the LGBTQ+ community and misconceptions about them.

### ***Physiological Responses***

Physical reactions/responses to sexual victimization are also often vilified and used as justification to support these existing male rape myths, specifically the one that states that men cannot be raped. First, there is the misconception that it is physically impossible for a man to be raped by a woman. If a man does not want sex, many people think that he will simply not have an erection. However, it is entirely possible for men to “display physiological signs of arousal, including erection and ejaculation, when they do not want to have sex” (McKeever, 2018, p. 604). This is parallel to how women may lubricate and orgasm during rape (McKeever, 2018). The reality is that these physiological responses are entirely involuntary and may be employed by the body as a defense mechanism against the trauma being inflicted upon the body (McKeever, 2018). The argument that it is physically impossible for a woman to rape a man is not justified by physiological reactions. If this were an acceptable justification, we would also have to believe that any kind of physiological arousal in sexual situations is akin to consent, which is of course rendered untrue when a person is unconscious or unable to verbally consent for any reason (McKeever, 2018). Sometimes perpetrators use these physiological responses to



maintain secrecy or blame the victim, but it is crucial to remember that physical responses do not make a sexual assault admissible in any situation. If you are unable to consent verbally or have any unwanted sexual activity imposed upon your body, that is assault.

### **Male Survivors and #MeToo**

The me too hashtag was created by Tarana Burke in an effort to bring awareness to and hopefully mitigate the effects of rape culture in our society. She created it as a symbol of solidarity for women to be able to come forward with their stories of sexual assault (Hawkins et al., 2019). A new me too hashtag arose as a result of the movement and this was the hashtag me too men. It is thought that the emergence of this hashtag may have been in response to the singular focus on female victims (Hawkins et al., 2019). As discussed previously, men often lack resources and outlets to share their experiences of victimization and face particular barriers pertaining to gender norms and personal feelings of shame after assault, so this hashtag became a channel through which these frustrations could be released (Hawkins et al., 2019).

The emergence of this hashtag highlights the importance of social media and modern technology for dispelling rape myths in general and more specifically, male rape myths as well. Hawkins et al., found in a qualitative study, that a large majority of responses to posts on Twitter.com using the hashtag me too men, were in support of victims and offering encouragement that disputed male rape myths (2019). With that being said, some of the reactions to men coming forward with their experiences were still negative and propagating these myths (Hawkins et al., 2019). This emphasizes the potential use of social media as a tool for continuing to shift cultural opinions about male rape and eliminating myths.

Male rape myths are highly evident in public reactions to the me too stories of two very prominent men. Terry Crews and Shia LaBeouf are both famous actors who decided to come

forward with their stories of victimization. Crews was ridiculed when he told his story, not only because the perpetrator of his assault was male, but also because Crews is a Black man. There is a historic perception of Black men as being the perpetrators of violence and not victims (Curry, 2019) and this adds another layer of complexity to the victimization of men of color. It becomes even more challenging for society to accept people like Terry Crews as victims. Crews is a strong, muscular man, so the myth that men cannot be assaulted comes into play. Many think that because of his appearance, he surely would have been able to fend off anyone who would try to assault him, sexually or otherwise (Curry, 2019). However, when met with circumstances such as someone in a higher position of power than you choosing to violate your body, the body might respond by freezing, rather than fighting or fleeing, as a defense mechanism or because you simply cannot process what is happening (Ralston, 2020). Crews also had a fear that fighting back would have led to him being stereotyped and demonized by the media because he is a Black man and the assault happened in a public setting. The attention would have undoubtedly been turned on him being the villain, rather than centering around the assault (Curry, 2019). Men of color thus have an added layer of erasure to their experiences as victims because of our country's history of "scapegoating" them as perpetrators (Curry, 2019, p. 300). It is difficult for our society to see them as victims and they are further discouraged from fighting back for fear of granting truth to stereotypes. Furthermore, Crews was assaulted by a man, which led many people to speculate on his sexuality, even though the assault was completely unwarranted (Curry, 2019). Again, we circle back to the myth that only gay men are assaulted or men who are assaulted then "turn" gay, which, as previously discussed, are both untrue.

In the case of Shia LaBeouf, he was also met with extreme backlash to his story. Although he is a white man, his perpetrator was female, which led to many questioning how he

could have been taken advantage of if he really did not want it (Levy & Adam, 2018). LaBeouf had a physiological response to the assault (Levy & Adam, 2018), which led him to question himself as a victim, showcasing how even victims internalize blaming attitudes based upon male rape myths. Public response to the story centered upon questioning LaBeouf's status as a "real" man because surely a real man would not have allowed a woman to take advantage of him (Levy & Adam, 2018). The public also focused on the perceived physical impossibility of a woman raping a man and how LaBeouf should actually feel "lucky" for having an experience such as this one (Levy & Adam, 2018), again calling attention to the hypersexualization of men in our society. These two cases of famous men showcase both the effects of gender norms on male victims as well as the effects of racial stereotyping and how they can overlap to facilitate secondary victimization by the public.

### **Female Perpetrators**

Female perpetrators of sexual assault are highly understudied because sexual crimes against men are often not taken seriously when they are perpetrated by females (Ralston, 2020). As previously mentioned, media portrayals have tremendously contributed to this issue, with male rape victims often being ridiculed and female perpetration being framed as comedic relief or and illicit sexual fantasy for viewers.

Female perpetration of sexual assault has recently been found to be more common than previously thought. Among men reporting sexual victimization besides penetration, 68.6% reported female perpetrators (Stemple et al., 2016). In addition, 79.2% of men who were victimized by being forced to penetrate, reported female perpetrators (Stemple et al., 2016). Returning to the idea of gender norms, we can consider that our society has a problem with accepting women as able to perpetrate an assault of this kind (Kassing & Prieto, 2003). Since

women are traditionally seen as the gatekeepers of sex and men are hypersexualized in a way that portrays them as needing to relish any opportunity for sex, it is difficult for our society to conceptualize how a man could be victimized by a woman through the lens of these traditional roles (Sleath & Bull, 2010). Moreover, “the amount of resistance exerted by a rape victim against an assailant does affect evaluators’ willingness to attribute blame to the victim for the attack” (Kassing & Prieto, 2003). Meaning, if men are unwilling or unable to fight off a female assailant or even try to resist, this makes people more likely to attribute blame to them as victims and not believe that what they experienced was assault. If a man does not fight off their assailant, he then may be seen as partly to blame for his assault.

The societal view of women as “weak, nonthreatening, and incapable of causing serious injury” (Weiss, 2010, p. 290) can also cause men who are overpowered by women and forced into a sexual encounter to not want to come forward with their experience for fear of embarrassment. They may internalize shame about not wanting sex in that moment or may even be conflicted in fighting off a female assailant because of the societal rule that women should not be hit under any circumstances. Here, we see how both male and female gender norms combine with powerful ideas regarding shame to further discourage men who are assaulted by women from sharing their experiences or reporting.

### **Retaliation and Victim Blaming**

The desire to conform to gender normative behaviors is present even after being assaulted and can be seen in the desire for retaliation that some male victims may have. Physical retaliation towards male assailants is more emphasized and demonstrated by male victims. This is because it allows men who have been victimized to assert their heterosexuality through what would be considered a “real” man’s response (Weiss, 2010), in other words, through physical violence.

Men's narratives of unwanted sexual contact with other men usually fall into two categories. The first one involves placing the blame on intoxication and thus vulnerability and loss of control. The second one includes the idea that men need to fight back and take care of matters like "real men" (Weiss, 2010). Male rape victims usually do not retaliate against female attackers. This can be explained by remembering that there is no threat to their heterosexuality when a woman is the assailant as well as because men are considered to be inherently hypersexual, so they should not be complaining about having sex. Even though advances by women may still be unwanted, heterosexual men still get the "benefit" of status enhancement because women want them, whereas advances by gay men may be seen as a threat to the victim's masculine identity, especially if the victim is heterosexual.

Sleath & Bull also found a distinction in the kind of blame that is placed on male survivors in comparison to female survivors (2010). Male survivors often experience more behavioral blame. That is, they are blamed for not taking more precautions or being more aware of the situation so as to not be assaulted (Sleath & Bull, 2010). This is different than women, who often experience more characterological blame, or blame that focuses on aspects of their personalities or dispositions (Sleath & Bull, 2010). These discrepancies in the kind of victim blaming that each gender experiences simply mirror our expectations of each gender. Women are supposed to watch how they act so as to not provoke an attack because they are the gatekeepers of sex, while men are supposed to be able to take action at any time in order to defend themselves against any kind of assault.

There is a concerning societal phenomenon called the "hierarchy of suffering" (Rumney, 2009). This hierarchy in a few words, judges rape to be worse for heterosexual men than for women or gay men. The hierarchy of suffering highlights again how heterosexual men are able

to benefit from their status in our society but also be damaged by it. Although there are conflicting ideas of what constitutes “real rape”, especially for men, heterosexual men will almost always be seen as more affected by rape than their gay or female counterparts (Rumney, 2009).

### **Justice Gap and Lack of Research**

Research on male victims of sexual violence “is almost 20 years behind that of female rape victims” (Sleath & Bull, 2010). Very few male rapes appear in police files and official records despite how much more prevalent male rape has been found to actually be (Stemple et al., 2016). This lack of research has led to a “justice gap” (Temkin & Krache, 2008). This justice gap is only exacerbated by societal perceptions of what constitutes “real” rape and sexual violence and what makes a victim worthy of actually being called a victim (Sleath & Bull, 2010). Only a small amount of assaults fall into what our society would consider “real” rape, so this gap will only continue to widen if we do not begin to take all kinds of situations into consideration.

### **Conclusions**

Male sexual victimization is more common than any of us may have previously considered. The statistics do not even include the cases that go unreported because of shame or stigma that victims may be afraid of facing, so numbers may be much higher than what we know. This topic becomes extremely relevant to psychological discourse as we consider this possible underreporting and the causes that underlie it. Men experience many of the same mental health effects that women do after being sexually victimized, but because of prevailing gender norms and ideas of masculinity, they feel like they have to move on and ignore these feelings and conflicts. Female perpetration is also downplayed both by popular media and gender stereotypes regarding women. Being aware of the effects of these stereotypes and how they feed into male

rape myths can help our society better understand how to help people in a time as vulnerable as after an assault. It is true that men have been the ones that have historically utilized sexual violence as a means to oppress women, but feminism has had the goal of fighting rape myths about women for a long time and it is only fair that the same conversation happens for men. Wanting to protect male victims and raising awareness for the circumstances surrounding society's treatment of them is not with the goal of lessening the experiences of women as victims. Rather, having these discussions allows us to see how misogyny has negative effects on everyone and can also aid in the creation of more gender inclusive programs for dealing with this kind of trauma, that are capable of addressing both male and female experiences.

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