Male Survivors of Sexual Violence

SILENCE, MYTHS, AND INSTITUTIONAL HARM

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Overview

- Brief agenda of the talk
  - Prevalence and challenges to recognition
  - Impact of male rape myths
  - Barriers to disclosure and help seeking
  - Lived experiences of survivors
  - Implications for support and policy

Male victims of sexual violence

- **It doesn’t happen to men**
  - 1 in 4 men, 1 in 6 boys are reported to have lifetime experiences of SV
- **Men are less affected**
  - Depression; Anxiety
  - Nightmares; Flashbacks and intrusive thoughts
  - Anger and self-evaluative emotions
  - Sexual and gender identity crises
- **Men can cope with it**
  - Struggle with **recognition, disclosure, help seeking, accessing support**
  - **Typically have fewer resources available**

Male rape myths (MRM)

Extending Rape Culture

- Serve a similar function to myths about female victims but reinforce toxic masculinity and homophobia.
- **Strength and Masculinity**:
  - *"Real men cannot be raped" / "Men are too strong to be raped.”*
- **Homophobia**:
  - *"Only gay men are raped" / "Men claim rape to hide their sexuality.”*
- **Victim-Blaming**:
  - *"Men who are raped asked for it" / "Male rape is not traumatic.”*
- **Stereotypes of Rape**:
  - *"Only men in prisons are raped" / "Only big/strong men can rape other men."*

My Research: Key Questions

- **How do male survivors make sense of sexual victimisation?**
  - Lived experiences of rape and sexual abuse across age, ethnicity, and context
  - Identity, masculinity, and emotional aftermath
- **What shapes disclosure and access to support?**
  - Cultural silence, stigma, and shame (e.g. South Asian men's experiences)
  - Intersectional barriers: race, gender norms, and homophobia
- **How do support services respond to male survivors?**
  - Interviews with service providers
  - Gaps in training, institutional recognition, and resourcing

‘I didn’t feel I was a victim’

Findings from men with histories of rape/sexual abuse after the age of 13 in the UK (Widanaralalage et al. 2022 - Victims & Offenders)

Silence & Discomfort

”Men don’t like to hear about other guys getting f****d…it’s a graphical, visceral experience.”

Masculinity, Stoicism, and Invulnerability

”I will square up to you even if you might knock me out. That shows you, and the world, that you’re touch and I am tough.”

Mockery and Stigma

”I’ve shared my experience of rape and people laughed. They ask if my rapist was good looking.”

‘I didn’t feel I was a victim’

Findings from men with histories of rape/sexual abuse after the age of 13 in the UK (Widanaralalage et al. 2022 - Victims & Offenders)

Exclusion from services

“It’s the only local resource I have access to, and they say they’re primarily for women [because] these crimes are almost exclusively done by men”

Institutional Victim Blaming

“You feel like you’re guilty until proven innocent...you doubt your own decisions, made me feel like I was wrong, and I potentially ruined someone else’s life”

Institutional Betrayal

I told the police straight away … crying, covered in dirt: “Some guy just raped me, I don’t know what to do”. The officers just said “Oh, just go home and sober up”.

‘We don’t talk about that around here’

Findings from in-depth IPA interviews with 11 South Asian men in the UK who experienced childhood sexual abuse (Widanaralalage et al. 2025; BMC Psychology)

Family Honour and Shame:

“If this comes out… what’s it going to achieve? What are people going to say?…He’s apologised. What are you going to get from speaking up about it now?”

Taboos on Sex and Mental Health

“Sex was never really spoken about….always associated it with shame. Growing up I never even considered the idea that I could have been vulnerable to sexual victimisation

Dismissal and Silencing

“My family never took me seriously… they always took me for a kid who’s being rebellious. Even today… my parents just constantly tell me to get over it.”

‘We don’t talk about that around here’

Findings from in-depth IPA interviews with 11 South Asian men in the UK who experienced childhood sexual abuse (Widanaralalage et al. 2025; BMC Psychology)

‘Going Undercover’ to Seek Support

“It would be like me going undercover to go have therapy and then coming back and trying to fake my emotions. It’s honestly hard and it’s exhausting… inside, you’re just broken.”

Distrust in Systems

“Just imagine you’re a police officer… I’m telling you I was physically assaulted; there’s a sexual abuse case going on. You basically just tell me to change my clothes and go for a walk… and they get away with everything.”

Need for culturally competent support

“A White counsellor is never going to understand the dynamics of BAME family. They say“Just cut off your parents…” our family dynamics don’t work like that.”

‘It’s a secretive place for men to be’

Findings from interviews with 12 UK-based service providers supporting male survivors of rape and sexual abuse (Widanaralalage et al., 2023 – Violence & Victims)

Regaining Agency in a Masculine Frame

Working with shame, control, and limited emotional expression

“They would fight anybody… ‘I’m not going to be overpowered again.’”

“I’ve got to be strong. I’ve to hold it together. I’m going to bury my emotions.”

Male Rape Myths in the Therapy Room

Navigating internalised myths and their psychological fallout

“How do you say, ‘This happened to me’? That strips away all those labels society’s put on you as a man.”

“Even amongst other counsellors… it’s not as traumatic because [men] have got the physical capacity to stop it.”

Institutional Harm and Mistrust

Rebuilding trust eroded by systemic dismissals and disbelief

“These guys carry this abuse for so long… then it doesn’t go to court — like they always thought it would.”

“They’re guilty of something, rather than somebody who’s trying to report.”

Conclusions

- **Male survivors face distinct, under-recognised barriers**
- Cultural narratives and masculinity norms shape silence
- Services often replicate dominant myths or exclude men
- **Policy**
  - Embed gender- and culturally competent training in frontline services
  - Expand survivor-centred services beyond gendered models
  - Ensure institutional accountability in police and mental health responses
- **Future Research**
  - Explore survivors' trajectories across systems (e.g. CJS, NHS)
  - Centre racially minoritised and LGBTQ+ survivors
  - Evaluate impact of training and intervention models

THANKS!

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Please feel free to connect or get in touch.