

Female Sexual Violence Against Men: Attitudes & Research

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Introduction and Definitional Challenges

The study of attitudes toward **Female Perpetrated Sexual Violence Against Men (FPSVAM)** represents a critical, yet often neglected, area within sexual violence research. While societal narratives and public policy traditionally focus on male perpetrators and female victims, FPSVAM is a recognized form of abuse that challenges deep-seated gender norms regarding power, vulnerability, and sexual agency. Understanding these attitudes is crucial because they profoundly influence victim disclosure, institutional response, and the availability of support services. When sexual violence is committed by a woman against a man, the incident often clashes fundamentally with prevailing cultural scripts that define masculinity as inherently powerful and female sexuality as inherently passive or non-coercive. This dissonance leads to complex psychological and social barriers for male survivors seeking recognition and justice, resulting in high levels of minimization and disbelief from the public and professional sectors.

A significant hurdle in addressing FPSVAM lies in the definitional frameworks historically used to categorize sexual violence. For decades, many legal and clinical definitions were implicitly or explicitly gendered, focusing on penetration by a penis or assuming the victim was female. Although modern definitions, such as those adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or the United Nations, have moved toward gender-neutral language encompassing all forms of non-consensual sexual contact, the societal understanding often lags. This definitional inertia contributes to the invisibility of male victims, as their experiences may not readily fit the internalized cultural schema of what constitutes "rape" or "sexual assault." Consequently, victims themselves may struggle to label their experience as abuse, further complicating reporting and access to timely intervention.

The core problem examined here is not the existence of FPSVAM, but the mechanisms by which societal attitudes trivialize or deny its seriousness. These attitudes are rooted in a combination of traditional gender stereotypes, myths about sexual desire, and the perceived power differential between men and women. If the victim is presumed to be physically and socially stronger, the coercive nature of the female perpetrator's actions is often dismissed. This dismissal has serious implications, contributing to a climate where male victims face intense scrutiny regarding their actions, their masculinity, and their perceived enjoyment of the encounter, regardless of the absence of consent. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of FPSVAM attitudes necessitates deconstructing the gendered assumptions that underpin our understanding of sexual harm.

Historical Context and Delayed Recognition

Historically, the recognition of male sexual victimization, particularly at the hands of women, has been severely delayed. This delay is inextricably linked to the dominance of patriarchal structures that define men as powerful, sexually aggressive, and impervious to victimhood. Within this

framework, a man who reports being sexually assaulted by a woman is often seen as failing to uphold the tenets of **hegemonic masculinity**, leading to ridicule rather than empathy. Early advocacy efforts focusing on sexual violence rightly prioritized female victims, given the overwhelming prevalence and systemic nature of violence against women, but this focus inadvertently reinforced the notion that sexual assault was exclusively a female problem.

The turning point toward greater recognition began in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, driven by researchers and advocates who successfully pushed for gender-neutral definitions in criminal statutes and federal surveys. This shift allowed male victims to be counted statistically, revealing that the prevalence of male sexual victimization, though lower than female victimization, was far from negligible. However, this inclusion was met with significant resistance and skepticism. Initial research often had to contend with the widespread belief that male victims were exaggerating or misinterpreting the incident, requiring researchers to employ rigorous methodologies to validate the coercive nature of the female perpetrator's actions, which often involved psychological manipulation, intoxication, or leveraging professional power.

Furthermore, the narrative surrounding the historical lack of recognition is complicated by the fact that many instances of FPSVAM were previously categorized under broader, non-sexual assault charges, or simply dismissed as non-crimes. This systematic erasure meant that institutional responses, such as rape crisis centers and hotlines, were often unprepared or structurally unequipped to handle male survivors, especially those victimized by women. The historical context thus demonstrates that attitudes toward FPSVAM are not merely benign misunderstandings, but are active mechanisms of denial that protect the societal illusion of male sexual invulnerability and female sexual innocence.

Societal Beliefs and Gender Stereotypes

Societal attitudes toward FPSVAM are heavily filtered through the lens of rigid gender stereotypes. The dominant cultural script dictates that men are constantly seeking and capable of sexual activity, implying that any sexual encounter, even if non-consensual, should be inherently desirable or flattering. This stereotype is particularly damaging in cases of FPSVAM because it provides a rationale for dismissing the victim's lack of consent. The notion that a man could be coerced or forced into sexual activity by a woman is often viewed as logically impossible, given the typical physical differences and the cultural expectation that men should always be able to assert physical resistance.

Another critical belief structure is the myth surrounding the female perpetrator. Women are culturally stereotyped as being nurturing, non-aggressive, and incapable of true sexual violence or coercion. This belief system makes it difficult for observers to perceive the female perpetrator as a credible threat. When a woman uses non-physical coercion--such as threats of professional ruin,

manipulation through emotional blackmail, or leveraging institutional authority--these tactics are often undervalued compared to physical force. The resulting attitude is one of minimization: the incident is often framed in popular culture, media, and even within social circles, as a joke, a misunderstanding, or a trivial sexual escapade, severely diminishing the reality of the trauma experienced by the male victim.

These entrenched gender roles create a unique form of double bind for the male victim. First, his experience invalidates his identity as a strong man, leading to intense shame. Second, the perpetrator's gender shields her from accountability in the eyes of the public and potentially the justice system. The conflation of female sexuality with harmlessness ensures that the severity of the violence is systematically undermined, making it profoundly difficult for male survivors to receive the validation necessary for recovery. Challenging these stereotypes requires a fundamental shift toward recognizing that coercion is a matter of power dynamics and consent, independent of the perpetrator's or victim's sex or physical strength.

Barriers to Disclosure and Reporting

The attitudes discussed above translate directly into formidable barriers that prevent male victims of FPSVAM from disclosing their experiences or formally reporting the crime. The primary barrier is the overwhelming fear of disbelief and ridicule. A male victim often anticipates that sharing his story will lead to questions about his masculinity, his sexual orientation, or his physical competence (e.g., "Why didn't you fight back?"). This internalized shame is often more potent than the shame experienced by female victims, as it involves not only the trauma of the assault but also the trauma of failing to meet rigid societal expectations of manhood.

Furthermore, institutional barriers significantly impede reporting. When male victims approach law enforcement, medical professionals, or university administrators, they often encounter personnel who are trained primarily to recognize and respond to violence against women. The lack of specialized training means that initial responses may be insensitive, dismissive, or overtly skeptical. For instance, a male victim reporting sexual coercion may be met with comments suggesting he should have "enjoyed" the encounter, or that the female perpetrator "didn't mean any harm." This secondary victimization by institutional agents reinforces the victim's decision to remain silent, leading to gross underreporting in official statistics.

The specific fears related to disclosure are numerous and complex, often compounding the original trauma. These fears demonstrate how societal attitudes actively silence survivors:

Questioning of Sexual Identity: Fear that reporting assault by a woman will lead to assumptions about the victim's sexual orientation or competence.

Loss of Social Status: Concern that peers, especially male peers, will view the victim as weak or

emasculated.

Legal Vulnerability: Worry that the perpetrator may reverse the accusation, leading to legal action against the male victim (e.g., for assault or harassment), given the difficulty in proving coercion.

Professional Ramifications: Fear that disclosure in professional settings will lead to dismissal or marginalization due to perceived instability or weakness.

The Phenomenon of Victim Blaming and Minimization

Victim blaming is an endemic issue across all forms of sexual violence, but it takes on a distinct and severe character in cases of FPSVAM. Because of the enduring myth that male victims should have enjoyed the sexual attention or possessed the physical capability to resist, the focus shifts immediately from the perpetrator's actions to the victim's supposed passivity. Male victims are frequently subjected to specific blaming questions that reinforce gender stereotypes, such as asking why they did not achieve an erection or why they did not physically overpower the woman, regardless of whether the coercion involved physical force, emotional manipulation, or incapacitation. This attitude essentially holds the victim responsible for the failure of the sexual encounter to meet the expectations of traditional masculinity.

Minimization, closely related to blaming, refers to the systematic downplaying of the severity of the assault. When FPSVAM is discussed, it is often framed as a less serious crime than male-on-female assault, sometimes even being portrayed humorously in media or social conversation. This minimization directly affects the victim's ability to process the trauma, as the external environment continually sends signals that their suffering is illegitimate or unwarranted. This lack of validation can lead to complicated grieving processes, where the victim not only deals with the assault but also the profound shame of feeling they should be grateful for or unaffected by the encounter.

Crucially, these attitudes of blaming and minimization are not confined to informal social settings; they often permeate the very institutions meant to provide justice and healing. Studies have shown that some legal professionals and counselors harbor implicit biases that make them less likely to believe male victims, or more likely to suggest that the male victim had some level of agency or complicity in the event. This institutional failure to recognize the validity of the trauma further isolates the survivor, hindering the successful prosecution of female perpetrators and undermining efforts to create gender-neutral support systems.

Psychological and Social Consequences for Male Victims

The psychological and social consequences faced by male victims of FPSVAM are severe and demonstrate that the impact of sexual violence is determined by the trauma itself, not the gender of the perpetrator. Male survivors experience high rates of **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**,

major depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal ideation, outcomes highly consistent with those observed in female survivors. However, the experience of FPSVAM is often compounded by the intense isolation resulting from non-disclosure, driven by the fear of challenging their masculine identity. This isolation prevents them from accessing vital coping mechanisms and therapeutic interventions.

The social consequences are particularly acute due to the gendered nature of the assault. The experience often fundamentally challenges the male victim's self-perception as sexually competent and dominant, leading to significant difficulties in forming and maintaining intimate relationships. Victims may struggle with issues of trust, anxiety regarding future sexual encounters, and profound feelings of emasculation. The trauma can disrupt their ability to perform expected gender roles, sometimes leading to compensatory behaviors, such as excessive aggression or withdrawal, as they attempt to reconcile the trauma with their identity. The secrecy enforced by societal attitudes means that male victims often suffer in silence, leading to higher rates of maladaptive coping strategies, including substance abuse.

The key areas of psychological and social impact highlight the gravity of FPSVAM:

Identity Conflict: The assault creates a deep conflict between the experience of vulnerability and the cultural mandate of male strength, often resulting in prolonged periods of self-doubt and shame.

Sexual Dysfunction: Victims frequently report difficulties with intimacy, erectile dysfunction, or aversion to sexual contact, stemming from the coercive nature of the past encounter.

Lack of Validation: Unlike female victims, male victims often lack readily available social scripts or support groups that validate their experience, leading to feelings of profound alienation.

Increased Risk-Taking: Some victims engage in heightened risk-taking behaviors or demonstrate increased aggression as a means of reasserting a challenged sense of masculinity.

The Role of Legal and Institutional Responses

Attitudes toward FPSVAM dramatically influence the effectiveness and equity of legal and institutional responses. While many jurisdictions have transitioned to gender-neutral definitions of sexual assault in their criminal codes, the application of these laws remains susceptible to underlying societal biases. In courtroom settings, female defendants often benefit from the same stereotypes that harm male victims: juries may struggle to believe that a woman could exert sufficient coercion or force, or they may minimize the severity of the victim's trauma, leading to lower conviction rates or lighter sentences compared to similar male-on-female cases. This disparity highlights that legal neutrality in text does not automatically translate to gender equity in

practice.

Furthermore, institutional support systems, including hospitals, university counseling centers, and non-profit victim advocacy groups, have historically been slow to adapt to the needs of male survivors of FPSVAM. Many services were originally designed and marketed exclusively for female victims, leading to environments where male survivors feel unwelcome, misunderstood, or that their trauma is secondary. The necessary shift involves not only creating male-specific support groups but also ensuring that all staff are trained to recognize the specific dynamics of female-perpetrated abuse, including forms of non-physical coercion that may be less familiar in traditional training models.

Effective institutional response requires a dedicated effort to counteract the prevailing attitudes of disbelief. This includes mandatory training for police officers and prosecutors on the unique barriers faced by male victims, implementing protocols for gathering evidence of psychological coercion, and promoting public education campaigns that explicitly validate the experiences of male survivors. Without proactive measures to address bias within the justice and healthcare systems, the legal framework, despite its gender-neutral language, will continue to function in a way that disproportionately benefits female perpetrators and fails male victims.

Research Challenges and Future Directions

Research into attitudes toward FPSVAM is essential for driving policy change, but it faces significant methodological and ethical challenges. The most critical challenge is the reliance on samples limited by **underreporting bias**. Because male victims are highly reluctant to disclose their victimization due to the societal attitudes discussed, studies often rely on convenience samples or non-representative populations, potentially underestimating true prevalence and skewing data regarding the types of coercion used. Future research must prioritize large-scale, population-based surveys that employ sensitive, gender-neutral language to capture the full scope of male victimization.

Future directions in research must also delve deeper into the specific cognitive mechanisms driving minimization and victim blaming. This involves exploring the intersectionality of identities, examining how race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status modify attitudes toward male victimization. For instance, attitudes toward a gay male victim assaulted by a woman may differ significantly from attitudes toward a heterosexual male victim, introducing layers of complexity related to perceived sexual desire and social power. Furthermore, research should focus on detailing the specific coercive tactics employed by female perpetrators, moving beyond simple definitions of force to include sophisticated analyses of emotional manipulation, threats of self-harm, and the leveraging of institutional authority.

Ultimately, the goal of future research and advocacy must be to fundamentally shift societal

attitudes toward a truly gender-neutral understanding of sexual violence. This requires recognizing that vulnerability is not a gendered trait and that coercion is a function of power imbalance, irrespective of the physical characteristics of the individuals involved. By rigorously studying and challenging the deep-seated stereotypes that perpetuate disbelief and minimization, researchers can provide the evidence base necessary for creating supportive environments where all survivors of sexual violence, including men victimized by women, feel safe enough to seek justice and initiate the healing process.

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