



Social

## PREVALENCE OF RAPE MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA



Tanishka S. Safri \*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>\*1</sup> Research Scholar, Babu Banarsi Das University, Lucknow, INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*Rape has been perceived as the most brutal crime against women that affects not only the physical being but also the psychological being of the victim. We know that several rape cases take place in our society but very few are reported. The most important reason for this is the prevalence of rape myths in our society which are false beliefs about rape and about those who are affected by it. India is a developing country and is changing quickly. It is witnessing remarkable developments in several fields such as science, technology etc. But unfortunately the crime rate is also increasing in this country, especially the crime of rape. The present research study is an attempt to understand that to which degree the rape myths are prevalent in India. The paper will also bring into light the amount, respondents in the study are aware of rape facts. For the present study 100 individuals were selected between the age of 18-35 years, out of which 50 were males and 50 were females. The paper reveals that rape myths are quite common even in the present era and for a few myths the respondents seemed totally unaware of the fact behind them*

### Keywords:

*Rape, Rape Myths, India, Society.*

**Cite This Article:** Tanishka S. Safri, “PREVALENCE OF RAPE MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA” International Journal of Research – Granthaalayah, Vol. 3, No. 11(2015): 147-152. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v3.i11.2015.2924>.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

What do statements like “she really wanted it,” “no way he was assaulted” and “ho’s like that deserve it” have in common? They’re all rape myths—and they’re just a few of the stereotypical, prejudicial and generally false beliefs people have about rape and sexual assault. Rape myths are beliefs that are ‘widely and persistently held’ (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 133) in society which ‘deny, downplay or justify sexual violence’ (Bohner, 1998, p. 14). they form ‘prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists’ (Burt, 1980, p. 217), and result in vindicating the perpetrator’s actions by placing culpability on the victim (Costin & Schwarz, 1987). Rape Myths arise from people's need to make sense of acts that are senseless, violent or disturbing. They attempt to explain events, like rape and abuse, in ways that fit with our preconceived ideas about the world - they arise from and reinforce our prejudices and stereotypes.

Myths of rape give people a false sense of security by legitimizing sexual assault or denying that it even occurs. They often do this by blaming the victim for their experience or making excuses and minimizing their assault. In effect, these myths perpetuate sexual assault by not addressing the realities of rape.

Rape myths exist for a number of historical and cultural reasons, including gender role expectations, acceptance of violence and misinformation about sexual assault, and they are one reason why so many rape victims are shamed into remaining silent.

One of the reasons why rape myths exists has been explained in 'The Feminist Theory' by Brownmiller (1975). Brownmiller (1975) defined the 'criminal act of rape' as an incident in which 'a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man and the man chooses to proceed against her will' (p.18). Feminist theorists argue that rape is motivated by the 'desire to assert power over women' (Buss & Malamuth, 1996, p. 269) and maintain patriarchal control. Caput and Russell (1990) argued that 'the aim of violence against women, conscious or not, is to preserve male supremacy' (p. 34). Therefore, rape is considered to be a 'direct expression of sexual politics, an assertion of masculinist norms, and a form of terrorism that preserves the status quo' (Caput & Russell, 1990, p. 34) in order to sustain control. Brownmiller (1975) suggested that man's physical attributes, such as strength, size and sexual anatomy, 'led to the realization that women could be controlled and traumatized by using sex as a tool of domination' (Buss & Malamuth, 1996, p. 270). Rape is viewed by feminists as a method of control and domination, a 'conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear' (Brownmiller 1975, p. 15). Feminists further argue that rape myth acceptance contributes to this fear. They state that women believe they are subject to the constant threat of being raped unless they conform to traditional female roles, which place men at a higher social power status. Fear of rape 'keeps women at home' 'keeps women passive and modest for fear that they be thought provocative' (Griffin, 1979, p. 21). Rape myths are therefore viewed by feminists as simply an excuse for men to shift the blame for the sexual offense they have committed and to instill fear in women in order to gain power over women and reduce 'women's freedom of movement' (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003).

On the other hand Buss and Malamuth (1996) stated that empathy and tenderness are encouraged in females but discouraged in males. They stated that men need to conform to typically masculine behaviors, such as aggression (Frey & Douglas, 1992), and their fear of their own 'feminine side results in male's devaluation of women, hostility toward them and sexual arousal from dominating them' (Buss & Malamuth, 1996, p. 270). Frey and Douglas (1992) give the following example taken from a book written for young Christian men describing Christian male adulthood. 'A man of steel is a masculine man. He is aggressive, determined, decisive and dependent' 'he rejects softness and timidity. When he has made a decision based upon the best of his judgement, he is as unbendable as a piece of steel. These qualities of masculinity set him apart from women and children and weaker members of his own sex.' An overview of the literature on male sexual victimization 16 (Andelin 1974, p. 1819). This quote claims that the typical "masculine" traits are aggression, strength and dominance over women, the subordinated sex.

Similar to acceptance of rape myths and traditional gender stereotypes in which individuals believe that the victim is to blame for their assault, the Belief in a Just World (Lerner, 1980) states that there is never an innocent victim, that bad things only happen to bad people, therefore, the victim

must have deserved their fate. Whatley and Riggio (1993) reported that individuals with strong beliefs in a just world were more likely to attribute blame to the victim of rape compared to those with significantly less belief in the theory.

As previously mentioned, negative attitudes due to the endorsement of rape myths, sex-role or traditional gender stereotypes, and the belief in a just world can cause victim blaming. Anxiety related to such blame causes victims to refrain from reporting an incident through fear of being stigmatized. Research literature states that under-reporting of female rape is rife with 75% to 95% of rapes not being reported to the police.

Lees (1997) reported that in rape trials there is ‘a spectacle of degradation visited upon the victim rather than the offender’ (p. 73). Campbell and Johnson (1997) stated that victims of rape are often dealt with by unsympathetic police, lawyers (Frohmann, 1991), and juries (Koss, 2000) who all discriminate against victims of sexual offenses because they accept rape myths that diminish the seriousness of the sexual offense. Therefore, rape myths ‘create a climate’ that is ‘hostile to rape victims, portraying them as often willing participants of sexual encounters or even instigators of them’ (Alison & Wrightsman, 1993, p. 99). If rape myths pervade the judicial system, victims are less likely to report the offense through fear of being stigmatized as the guilty party, which ultimately allows the perpetrator to avoid punishment. Attending court can be traumatic enough for victims of rape or sexual violence as they will often face cross-examination on the specific intimate details of the case. Fear of the court process is enough to make a victim retract their allegations without the further fear of feeling persecuted by the court because of the court members’ acceptance of myths on sexual aggression. Such degradation of victims is a form of “secondary victimization” (Williams, 1984) because initially they suffer the primary sexual offense and subsequently are blamed for the incident by the Criminal Justice System. Such victimization can create further detrimental effects for a victim’s psychological recovery.

Rape is the fourth most common crime against women in India. A majority of rape cases in India, as elsewhere in the world, are never reported. Researchers estimate that 67–84% of rapes are not reported. Most incidents of rape are never reported to the police and, of those reported, less than 10% result in a conviction. The number of rape cases in India are increasing day by day. More and more women are coming out to report incidents of rape. Abel and Rouleau (1990), have, concluded that “the majority of sex offenders are not within the prison system, but “on the street.”

## 2. METHOD

**Purpose-** The purpose of the present study is to understand that to which degree are the rape myths prevalent in India, in the modern era.

**Sample-** The sample consisted of 100 individuals, 50 males and 50 females, between the age group of 18 to 35 years.

**Procedure-** A structured interview was conducted with each of the participants individually for data collection, where a series of fifteen statements in the form of questions were put across each participant regarding various rape myths and rape victims. For this study the fifteen most common rape myths have been chosen. Each participant gave his/her view about each of the rape myth.

### 3. RESULT

On analysis of the response given by each of the participant the following result was obtained. For each of the rape myths, the participants' responses were as follows-

For the first rape myth that, 'When a woman dresses provocatively, she's asking for trouble' 45% of the individuals believed that when a woman dresses up provocatively she indeed is asking for trouble. Whereas the rest of the 55% of people said that this is not the case. These respondents argued that women, especially those living in the rural areas of our country never dress up provocatively, but still get raped, therefore dressing has nothing to do with a woman getting raped. For the second rape myth that 'Only young and attractive women get raped' 84% of the individuals were not in favor of the statement and said that women of all ages and looks get raped irrespective of the fact whether they are young, attractive or not. While the rest believed that young and attractive women are only raped.

For the third rape myth 'If a woman is drunk or high, deserves to be raped,' for this statement 69% men were in favor of this statement while 95% of the females were not in support of this statement at all.

The fourth 'Women who stay out during the evening or at night are likely to be raped' for this statement 77% of the individuals were not in favor of the statement, arguing that women get raped during day time as well, while the remaining 23% of the respondents were indeed in favor of the statement.

The fifth, 'If a woman is dating someone, or is in love she is asking to be raped' to this statement, only 11% of the individuals were in favor of this statement, while the rest 89% of the respondents did not agree with the statement at all.

The sixth, 'Rape is done by strangers', for this statement 69% of the individuals believed that rape is done by strangers, while the rest 31% seemed aware of the fact that rape is mostly done by someone known rather than a stranger, citing a few examples of rape where rape was done by someone known to the victim.

The seventh, 'Rape is a crime of passion' to this statement, 53% of respondents believe that rape indeed is a crime of passion while the rest 47% were aware that rape is a crime of violence and aggression and not passion.

The eighth, 'A healthy person can resist being raped', to this statement 71% of the respondents believed that a healthy person can resist getting raped while the rest 29% believed that a healthy person cannot resist getting raped.

The ninth, 'If a person doesn't fight back, she wasn't really raped' to this 55% of the individuals believed that if a person doesn't fight back then it is not considered as a rape while the rest of the 45% respondents were not in favor of the statement.

The tenth, 'Rapists are abnormal perverts; only sick or insane men are rapists' to this statement 98% of the individuals believed that rape is done by abnormal and insane men who are psychologically unfit. While the rest 2% said that rape can be done by any individual whatsoever. The eleventh, 'Rape is a minor crime affecting only a few women.' To this statement only 15% of the respondents believed that only a few women get raped while the rest 85% said that rape is very much common and widespread and that it affects many individuals but it is not reported most of the time.

The twelfth, 'There are a lot of false rape reports', to this statement 99% of individuals said that there are very few or rare instances of false rape reports while the rest 1% said there are quite a bit of false rape report instances.

The thirteenth, 'Most rape cases are reported'. For this statement 95% of the respondents said that most of the time rapes are never reported. While the remaining 5% believed that mostly cases of rape are reported.

The fourteenth, 'Gang rape is rare'. For this statement majority of the respondents i.e. 87% believed that gang rape is quite common, while the rest of the 13% said that gang rape is not very common.

The fifteenth, 'Men cannot be sexually assaulted or raped'. For this statement, most of the respondents 96% believed that men cannot be sexually assaulted or raped. While the remaining 4% of the respondents believed that even men can be raped.

In addition to these, all the participants were also asked whether they would like to be friends with a person who has been raped, and whether they would be willing to become a case witness if the ever saw the crime of rape, or knew of any such case, and whether would they report or file a complaint if they were sexually assaulted or raped; to which 46% of the respondents said that they would not like to be friends with a person who has been raped while 54% said they do not mind being friends with a rape victim. 78% of the respondents said that they would be willing to become a case witness if they knew of any such case and 89% of individuals said that they would report a case, or file a complaint if they will ever be raped or sexually assaulted.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

On the basis of the present research it can be stated that not much difference exists between the attitudes of men and women towards various rape myths. Even though facts and research on rape myths point towards a different story altogether, it seems by the responses given by the participants that many of them are unaware of the rape facts, even though almost every day we hear of a rape case on television in news, read about such cases in the newspaper but these rape myths continue to prevail and somehow hinder the judicial system and our own personal perception of a rape case, and explain why in India rape cases are so underreported. By the responses given by the participants it can be clearly seen that many people in the study are unaware of the rape facts especially the fact that male rape also occurs.

Rape Myths can be combated by making the individuals aware of the rape facts and probing them to think deep about the possible reasons that why still so many rape myths are prevailing in our country and compelling them to try to change their way of thinking towards rape and rape victims. For this awareness is the most important requirement. Awareness of oneself and of others around us, and of whatever is going around us. Education is the tool for spreading awareness.

## 5. REFERENCES

- [1] Abrams, D., Vikki, T., Masser, B., & Bohner, G. (2003). *Perceptions of Stranger and Acquaintance Rape: The Role of Benevolent and Hostile Sexism in Victim Blame and Rape Proclivity*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 111-125.
- [2] Alison, J.A., & Wrightsman, L.S. (1993). *Rape: The Misunderstood Crime*. Sage Publications: London.
- [3] Andelin, A.P. (1974). *Men of Steel and Velvet*. Pacific Books: Santa Barbara CA.
- [4] Bancroft, J. (1980). *Psychophysiology of sexual dysfunction*. In L.Van Praag (Ed.), *Handbook of biological psychiatry* (pp 359-392). New York: Marcel Dekker.
- [5] Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will*. NewYork: Simon & Schuster.
- [6] Burt, M. (1980). *Cultural myths and supports of rape*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38, 217-230.
- [7] Caput & Russell (1990) cited in Buss, D.M., & Malamuth, N.M. (1996). *Sex, power, conflict: Evolutionary and feminist perspectives*. Oxford University Press: Oxford
- [8] Costin, F. & Schwarz, N. (1987). *Beliefs about rape and women's social roles: A four – nation study*. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 2, 46-56.
- [9] Ford, T.M., Liwag-McLamb, M.G., & Foley, L.A. (1998). *Perceptions of rape based on sex and sexual orientation of the victim*. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 13, 253-263.
- [10] Horvath, M., & Brown, J. (2009). *Rape: Challenging contemporary thinking*. London: Willian Publishing.
- [11] Nicola L. Fisher1, Afroditi Pina2\*,1Park House Residential Service, Birmingham, An overview of the research literature on male sexual victimization, An overview of the literature on female-perpetrated adult male sexual victimization. University of Kent.
- [12] Rubin, Z., & Peplau, L. (1975). *Who believes in a just world?* *Journal of Social Issues*, 31, 65-89.
- [13] Williams, J. (1984) *'Secondary Victimization: Confronting Public Attitudes About Rape*. *Victimology: An International Journal*, 9, 66-81.