

# **RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE AND ITS ROLE IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:**

## **A REVIEW**

STURJ, Vol. 1, Issue-2, DoP: 06.08.2021

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### *Abstract*

There is an urgent need to control the crime of rape all over the world. But for that, good understanding of the psychological factors behind the crime needs to be understood. This study attempts to conduct a review of prior research which explains how rape myth acceptance is causally linked to different themes of violence against women. A total of 30 researches of different genders, sample sizes and community criteria were selected. A qualitative meta-analysis was conducted to understand how the papers reveal different essential themes of violence against women, which are associated to rape myth attitudes among their respective participants. ‘Sexism & Racism’ is a theme which was ingrained in most number of reviews. The frequencies of the other themes and the cross linkages among them have been discussed.

**Keywords:** rape, myth, acceptance, violence against women, qualitative meta-analysis.

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### **Introduction**

Globally, violence against women is on a new high. The term ‘violence against women’ can be explained as any gender-based violence that causes suffering among women or deprivation of their liberty in some way (Gomez, 1996). Saravanan (2010) states that violence is often perpetrated on women, simply because they are ‘women’ and this violence can be directed either verbally or by physical force, i.e. direct violence. The different forms of violence take place in three contexts: the family, the community and the state (Saravanan, 2010). The global spread of women’s experience of violence is alarming. Violence against women has been one of

the major contributors of ill health among women around the world, endangering both their mental and physical health (Banda & Bhattacharjee, 2019). WHO pointed out that women who have been subjected to violence are more likely to develop depression and problem-drinking behaviour. Violence can also result in homicide and suicide among the women. There are merely a few variations that can be found in the pattern of violence against women across the different countries of the world. The adverse social impact of violence against women is immense. Gomez (1996) was of the view that irrespective of gender, prolonged direct violence can influence socialization, which in turn can make people receive or inflict more suffering according to the social function they fulfill.

One of the most important determinants of violence against women is the acceptance of rape myths. In several ways, it has been established that, more the crime of rape is taken for granted, the more does it contribute to the sexual violence against women (Miller & Schwartz, 1995). The operational definition of rape myth acceptance, laid by Burt (1980) is that they are the false beliefs about rape, rape victims and the perpetrators. As stated by the Social Learning theorists, when women are negatively seen as “sexual playthings” of men, it directly or indirectly promotes the occurrence of rape (Walsh & Ellis, 2006). The theory further attributes violent behavior against women to the perpetuation of rape myths and the association of sexuality and violence (Beck et al., 2012). Even though prior studies have been conducted, they are not enough to determine the important factors associated with rape myth acceptance (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). The purpose of this study is to conduct a qualitative meta-analytic review to elaborate how rape myths contribute to the different themes related to violence against women. Similar meta-analytic reviews have been conducted to understand victim blaming, which is an important domain of rape myth acceptance (Whatley, 1996) and also, to understand overall attitude towards rape among people (Anderson, Cooper & Okamura, 1997).

## **Objective**

To perform a qualitative meta-analytic review of different relevant researches to determine how rape myth acceptance is linked to violence against women.

## **Method**

Different online and offline libraries, journals were reviewed to find out significant literatures relevant to the objective of the study. In online search engines, terms such as “rape myth acceptance”, “rape”, “violence against women”, “rape and related factors” were searched to come up with relevant prior research. The studies related to these keywords and fulfilling the other criteria were selected. A total number of 30 reviews were finalized. The inclusion criteria were: only academic articles in the journals and theses will be selected; the studies may have been conducted in any part of the world; they should be written in English language and lastly, the studies should have been published after the year 1995. The exclusion criteria were: reviews and meta-analytic studies; studies which use samples of age group beyond 18-30 years.

After the selection of the literatures, the qualitative network meta-analysis was conducted to understand the theme or nature of the violence against women and what is the frequency (strength) of each theme.

## **The reviews**

In a study on college students, Aberle and Littlefield (2001) attempted to compare the family functioning and rape-supportive attitudes. There were 76 participants and the mean age was 25 years. It was found in the canonical correlation model that a significant relationship existed between rape supportive attitudes and family functioning factors, which included conflicts (violence).

In a study by Aosved and Long (2006), it was attempted to determine the coexisting variables of rape myth acceptance. This study included 998 college students and concluded that

sexism (one important aspect of violence against women), was the variable with the highest overlap with rape myth acceptance.

Black et al. (2000) conducted a study to alter the attitudes of the people regarding their firmly held rape myths. They utilized theatrical presentation strategies and peer education which stressed on enlightening the 150 participants of their study on aspects related to violence against women. Also, they attempted to find how the knowledge could eradicate false beliefs regarding rape.

In a study by Blecker and Murnen (2005), the relationship between fraternity membership and behaviours linked to sexual aggression against women were elucidated. In this study, 60 male students participated, each one of who exhibited in their rooms, different forms of posters, advertisements and other media suggestive of rape supportive attitudes. It was found that the fraternity of men who exhibited more of these media had more rape myth acceptance.

In a study including 623 undergraduate women (mean age=25 years), the authors Carmody & Washington (2001) attempted to find how race and history of being victimized, affects their rape myth acceptance. A similar nature of rape myth acceptance was observed for both the non-victims and prior victims. Further, the findings stated, though most women were found to reject the myths, some were supportive of them; the differences being mainly on the basis of patterns of socialization.

In another study by Christopher, Madura and Weaver (1998), including 621 students, the gender differences and correlates of sexual aggression were examined. The results stated that there exists significant association between past and present sexual aggression against women. In men, accepting rape myth was related to conflicts (exhibiting violence) in relationship. The role of rape myths is prevalent in other taboo areas that fall under the domain of sexual interpersonal relationships. In this study involving 783 university students, a revelation was made regarding

the increasing rape myth acceptance with an increase in prostitution myth acceptance. Further, acceptances of prostitution myths were found to justify violence against women (Cotton et al., 2002).

The attitudinal and cognitive style affects the nature of acceptance of rape myths. In a study conducted on 270 college students, it was further revealed that rape myths are associated with male stereotypes and the way they perceive women and feminism (Cowan & Quinton, 1997).

Devdas and Rubin (2007) conducted a cross culture study to understand rape myth acceptance. Since exposure to violence is different for different cultures, it is expected to vary across racial backgrounds as well. However, it was found that the second generation south Asian women had similar rape myth acceptance (i.e., did not differ significantly) to the European American women.

Drapeau (2003) explained that a negative attitude towards rape was the prime factor behind the act of rape, perpetrated by men. These kinds of attitudes are linked to men's sexual violence behavior against women.

Emmers- Sommer et al. (2006) attempted to link acceptance of rape myths with exposure to sexually violent media. The study included 174 students with a mean age of 20 years. They concluded that with more films featuring sex and violence, the stronger is their rape myth acceptance.

In another study, the relationship between sexist attitude, rape myths and sexual aggression was found out (Forbes, Adams-Curtis et al., 2004). The study included 264 students and concluded that second generation measures of rape myth were linked with sexually coercive behaviours.

The study by Forbes, Jobe et al. (2005), which included 428 students (mean age=18 years), concluded that in terms of getting even with the betrayal of trust, both men and women showed related vengeance and acceptance of rape myths.

Frydenborg (1999) included a sample of 365 students to study the possible predictors and effects of rape. It was found that men who perpetrate sexually aggressive behaviours had the highest rape myth acceptance and also, hostile attitude towards women.

In a study by Gamper (2004), again, the racial factors in rape myth acceptance were highlighted. The study included a large community sample of 1023 participants. It was revealed that perceived social competence, other than race was linked with rape supportive beliefs.

Hill and Fisher (2001) incorporated a sample of 114 students in their study, which hypothesized that masculine gender roles were linked to rape-related constructs. Utilizing a path analytic model, the authors concluded that men's sexual entitlement mediated the relation between their masculinity and rape myth acceptance & related behaviours (e.g., violence).

Holloway (2002) stated that acceptance of rape myth is a significant predictor of jury decision in a rape trial. The study included 282 students and it concluded that victim attractiveness and relation to the victim were not linked to the decisions made by the jury.

Racial difference was again studied in relation to rape myth acceptance, sexual harassment and sexuality (Kennedy & Gorzalka, 2002). Out of a total of 400 participants, 205 Asians showed higher rape myth acceptance and were more accepting of sexual harassment than their non-Asian counterparts.

La Verdiere (2005) aimed at determining the gender differences in rape myth acceptance among high school students (n=208; mean age=18 years). The results not only suggested that the males had higher rape myth acceptance, but also showed that rape prevention efforts reduced the occurrence of rape and violence against women.

Lee et al. (2005) examined the racial difference in rape myth acceptance. In this study including 169 college students, it was found that the Asians were more likely than the Caucasians to blame the victims of rape. They also believed that sex is the main motivator of rape.

Locke and Mahalik (2005) in their study stated that men who take alcohol and endorse masculine norms are more likely to accept more of the rape myths and more likely to report sexually aggressive behavior. The study included 254 male college students with a mean age of 20 years.

In a study by Loh et al. (2005), it was found that men who perceived token resistance from their partner are more likely to engage in sexually aggressive behaviour. This study included 325 male college students and also nullified some significant predictors of sexual aggression, generally theorized in prior literatures.

Loiselle and Fuqua (2007) again stressed on the role of alcohol on sexual assault. In this study, 42 undergraduate women participated and it was revealed that more the prevalence of alcohol consumption paired with higher rape myth acceptance among them, the more were their chances of risking (receiving) sexual assault.

Milhausen et al. (2006) in their pre and post interventional study stated that the intervention had no effect on rape myth acceptance. However, there was a significant effect on only 3 out of 5 subscales of a test, assessing sexual beliefs. Even after the intervention, participants showed very less degree of agreement to the “NO means STOP” call by women.

Monto and Hotelling (2001) incorporated 1286 male participants who were the clients of female street prostitutes. It was found that rape myth acceptance was predicted by violent sexuality and also, by the frequent thinking about sex.

In a study incorporating 1220 adults, Walfield (2018) stated that men who believe in traditional gender roles were more likely to adhere to rape myths. The study also revealed that with higher rape myth acceptance, there exist higher negative attitudes towards the homosexuals. In another study, 174 police officers participated to determine how blame mediates the relationship between rape myth acceptance and their response to sexual assault, signifying how supportive they are of the violence. The results confirmed this hypothesis and on an additional note, it was found that alcohol intake among the victims was related to lesser urgency responses from the Officers (Venema, 2019).

Utilizing a large sample of 1310 students, Fansher and Zedaker (2020) attempted to determine a relationship between rape myth acceptance and the view of sex and sexuality. The results stated that stereotypical gender beliefs and being male, were related to rape myth acceptance.

In a recent study in India, 910 students were incorporated to help determine the prevalence and predictors of rape myth acceptance among college students in India. The results indicated that rape myth acceptance was influenced by sexist attitudes, anti-social attitudes and low self-esteem (Qureshi et al., 2020).

In another recent study by Rich, Seffrin and McNichols (2021), an attempt has been made to determine the roles of rape myth acceptance and other variables in students' responses to a friend who is assaulted sexually. The results show that the college students (n=636; mean=23years) who were high on rape myth acceptance blamed the victim (their friend). They would be less supportive to them and would also exhibit shame and anger.

### **Qualitative Network Meta-Analysis**

Table 1: Themes related to Rape Myth Acceptance and their Frequencies



Themes of Violence against Women	<i>n</i>
Attitudes towards women	6
Sexism and racism	10
Adverse sexual beliefs	6
Homophobia	4
Normalizing rape	3
Male Dominance attitudes	6
Low feminist attitudes	3
Male Sexuality, Hostility & Pathology	7

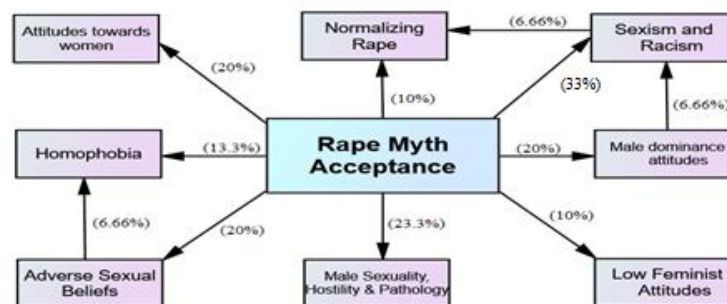


Fig.1: Illustration of the Meta-analysis

## Results and discussions

Table 1 shows the frequencies of the different aspects of violence against women, which are linked to rape myth acceptance. The Meta-Analysis Model (*Fig. 1*) sheds more light in this regard. The path with the highest frequency is found between the theme of sexism and racism’ and rape myth acceptance (33% of the reviews). Studies such as Kennedy and Gorzalka (2002) and Forbes, Adams-Curtis et al. (2004) support such findings. The next highest frequency is

noted for male-related variables such as their sexuality, hostility and pathology, which is a characteristic of 23.3% of the review literatures (Fansher & Zedaker, 2020 and others). Attitudes towards women, adverse sexual beliefs and male dominance attitudes form 20% of the reviews, each. They are the factors with the third highest frequency in the model to be linked with rape myth acceptance. 4 reviews (13.3%) show how rape myth acceptance can be linked with homophobia (Walfield, 2018 and others), which is an important domain of the violence being faced by women (Meyer, 2015). Lastly, normalizing rape (Gamper, 2004) and low feminist attitudes (Cowan & Quinton, 1997) form 10%, each. Some cross-links are also noted among the different themes. 2 studies (6.66%) link homophobia and adverse sexual beliefs. Another 2 studies link normalizing rape and male dominance attitudes to sexism and racism.

## **Conclusion**

A review was conducted to determine how violence (against women) variables are linked to acceptance of rape myths. The qualitative meta-analysis model revealed that sexism and racism were the most prominent characteristics among the research papers that were studied to understand the linkage between rape myth acceptance and hostility towards women. The findings can be applied to provide education and intervention programs to eradicate false rape-supportive attitudes from the young minds. These findings can also serve the future research works to understand more about rape and hostility towards women.

## **Funding**

There was no funding provided for this study.

## **Conflict of interests**

There are no noted conflicts of interests between the authors.

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