

## UNDERSTANDING RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE: THE ROLE OF GENDER, RELIGIOSITY, AND PRIOR HARASSMENT

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### Abstract

**Background:** Rape is a form of sexual violence which is on the rise and victims are likely to face negative social attention along with physical and emotional trauma. There are many different myths surrounding rape and society many at times show negative attitude towards rape victims.

**Objectives:** The present study was designed to explore rape myth acceptance among university undergraduates and to assess association of these variables with gender, religiosity and previous history of sexual harassment.

**Method:** A descriptive cross sectional study was conducted in Lahore. In total 350 university undergraduates with mean age of 21.51 years participated in the study. The participants were contacted at two private universities of Lahore. Responses were recorded using Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA) and data was analyzed through SPSS.

**Results:** There was no significant difference on rape myth acceptance for people with different religious inclination and for those who had experienced harassment and those who had not. However, men and women differed significantly on three of the four subscales of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale. Overall, women were more rejecting of rape myths compared with men. This finding supports the previous research which suggests that men have a higher acceptance for rape myths and have a higher tendency to blame the victim.

### INTRODUCTION

Violence against women has a long history and is observed to be present across all cultures and regions in different forms. One of the common forms of violence against women is rape, pervasive across all countries and both in times of peace and war. Rape is a sexual violation also associated with long term physical and psychological problems (Basile et al., 2021; Sachs-Ericsson, 2014) in the form of suicidal ideation, anxiety, PTSD, fear, depression, eating and sleep difficulties (Gekoski et al., 2024; Naher et al.,

2020; Tarzia et al., 2018). World Health Organizations reported that almost one in every three women suffer from sexual violence at some point in their lives and in Pakistan 11 rape cases are reported everyday (The News, 2020). Despite the high rise in rape incidents, less than 40 % women seek help, and 97 % perpetrators walk free (World Population Review, 2021). It has been observed that majority of rape victims prefer to not report rape attempts (Lehner et al., 2017) because of the shame, fear of being blamed for it,

not being believed, being discriminated against and of other negative attitudes (Cohn et al., 2013; Frese et al., 2004). Although, all religions and legal systems condemn rape, the victim attracts blaming, discrimination and other forms of negative social attention. Regardless of the common occurrence of rape incidents, many misconceptions have always surrounded the phenomenon.

Rape myths encompass persistent false beliefs and attitudes that serve to justify and deny male sexual aggression against females (Crall, Goodfriend, 2016). The myths about rape experience can be of many different types but most common of these include myths state that wearing provocative dresses attracts negative attention, women use specific characteristics and actions to attract rape, women find rape pleasurable and secretly desire it, victims intentionally seduce perpetrators etc.

Rape myths originated from many sources (Strömwall et al., 2013) like stereotypical beliefs, religious beliefs, social norms and beliefs against women, stereotypical beliefs about masculine physical needs, beliefs about male sexual aggression etc. (Barnett et al., 2018; Nisar et al., 2021; Rimmer &, 2019). The stereotypical characteristics that are attributed to “good” and “bad” woman and social norms and stereotypical beliefs justifying the male aggression towards females played the most significant role in determining the acceptance of rape myths and encouraging negative attitude towards rape victims.

Unfortunately, trend is observed in all countries that the negative social attitudes discourage rape victims and encourage the perpetrators. Negative social judgement and attitudes are directed towards victims which most of the times shift the focus from perpetrators and is like putting responsibility upon victim (Javaid, 2015).

There are many organizations and institutes that constantly work to develop awareness and promote prevention against rape. Despite all the efforts not only the rate of rape incidents but negative attitude towards victims is also on rise (Kamdar et al., 2017). Research even reported that the awareness campaigns failed to eradicate

the negative attitude and rape myths and people instead developed subtle rape myths in place of obvious myths.

Young adults are reported to hold many of these rape myths and most of the times these are present in more covert or subtle forms (McMahon & Farmer, 2011)

Research has shown mixed findings regarding gender differences as both men and women are identified to hold strong negative attitudes towards rape victims. However, men are reported to more frequently and easily accept rape myths compared to women (Crall & Goodfriend, 2016; Yapp & Quayle, 2018).

Acceptance of rape myths leads to negative attitude towards rape victims harboring negative emotions and reactions towards victims. This vicious cycle doesn't support rape victims in any way, instead it increases their problems (Johnson et al., 2023). Most rape myths put the blame on victims and are most likely to develop secondary victimization. Researches in Pakistan have identified many rape myths that blame the victims holding them responsible for the rape. These studies have also pointed that men held more myths and attitudes towards rape victims and are more negative compared to women .

Teenagers and young adults are most frequent victims of rape and unfortunately rape myths are strongest and more common among young adults (Crall, Goodfriend, 2016).

As the incident of rape is reported to have a significant rise in Pakistan during past few decades (Jamshed & Kamal, 2019), it becomes more relevant to study the rape acceptance myths and attitude towards rape victims.

Literature suggests that prejudicial beliefs against women have become more subtle over time (McMahon & Farmer, 2011) so, instead of blaming victims directly people held the indirectly responsible for the ordeal like consider that they put themselves in vulnerable position by flirting or getting dressed in a certain way. The present research sought to assess the rape acceptance myths and attitude towards rape victims. It also aimed to explore the association of rape acceptance myths with attitude towards rape with age and gender.

**Methodology**

Present research is based on cross sectional study comprising a sample of 350 university undergraduates from Lahore. The sample consisted of 244 women (69.7%) and 106 men (30.3%) with mean age of 21.51 (SD= 1.607) years selected through nonprobability purposive sampling technique.

The data was collected using a demographic data sheet and Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (IRMA). Demographic form was used to record detailed personal information of the participants from their gender, age, family system, to any personal experience of harassment etc. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance scale (IRMA) updated version comprised 22 items in total and responses ranged from 1 = strongly agree to 5= strongly disagree was also used. The scale assesses rape acceptance myths categorized in 4 groups including “She asked for it, It wasn’t really Rape, He didn’t mean to and She lied”. Higher scores on the scales indicate higher rejection of the rape myths. IRMA showed satisfactory to good psychometric characteristics and is known to be one of the best scales to assess subtle rape myths (Thelan & Meadows, 2022).

*Attitude towards rape victims scale (ARVS)* was developed by Ward (1988) was used to assess the attitude towards rape victims. There are 25 items from which 8 items employed reverse coding, items are scored on a scale from 0 to 4 and scores can range from 0 to 100. High scores indicate respondent’s negative attitude towards rape victims. The scales were available in English language and the items were thoroughly reviewed for cultural relevance and content comprehension. The scale was administered on 10 undergraduate students to assess the suitability. No significant cultural or linguistic

bias was identified so it was decided to use the scales in their original form.

**Procedure:** The project was reviewed and approved by the research review committee. Data was collected from two liberal art universities of Lahore. Google form was created containing three main sections including demographic information, questions of RMAS and ARVS scales. A brief introduction of research was shared with different course instructors explaining research aims and other details, instructors were requested to share the google form link with their students. The form also provided the email contacts of the researchers to contact in case of any query. Participants were also told to contact the researchers in case any discomfort is triggered in response to filling the research form. In order to ensure privacy of the respondents their email ids were not collected and instead of recording names special codes were assigned to each respondent. Some participants didn’t fill the forms completely and the response rate for complete items was almost 79 percent.

The data was analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences, both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to assess data.

**Results**

Out of a sample of 350 undergraduate students, 216 (61.7%) stated that they had been sexually harassed in the past while 115 (32.9%) had not experienced sexual harassment. 220 students (62.9%) reported having an average religious inclination, while 24 (6.9%) reported having a weak and 83 (23.7%) reported having a very strong religious inclination. The mean scores and standard deviation for males and females on both measures have been reported below.

**Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations for the IRMA Scale and ARVS Scores**

Variables	Women	Men
Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA)		
She asked for it	22.00 (SD 6.47)	18.93 (SD 6.30)

He didn't mean to	20.39 (SD 5.76)	19.12 (SD 5.22)
It wasn't really rape	20.65 (SD 5.02)	18.96 (SD 5.19)
She lied	18.48 (SD 5.30)	15.38 (SD 5.11)
Attitude Towards Rape Victims Scale (ARVS)	25.41 (SD 14.82)	36.02 (SD 17.16)

Table 1 presents the descriptive results, overall, women demonstrated higher mean scores than men on three of the four rape myth acceptance subscales, namely *She Asked for It*, *It Wasn't Really Rape*, and *She Lied*. As higher scores on these subscales indicate greater rejection of rape myths, this pattern suggests that women were more likely than men to reject rape-supportive beliefs related to victim blame, denial of rape, and accusations of false reporting.

Specifically, women scored highest on the *She Asked for It* subscale, indicating stronger rejection of the belief that victims provoke or invite sexual assault. Similar trends were observed for the *It Wasn't Really Rape* and *She Lied* subscales, where

women again reported higher mean scores, reflecting lower acceptance of myths that minimize sexual violence or discredit victims' accounts. In contrast, gender differences on the *He Didn't Mean To* subscale were relatively small, suggesting comparable attitudes among men and women regarding intent-based justifications for sexual assault.

Regarding attitudes toward rape victims, men reported substantially higher scores on the ARVS than women. Given that higher ARVS scores reflect more negative attitudes toward rape victims, this finding indicates that men held more unfavorable perceptions of rape survivors than women.

**Table 2 Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) for Gender, Religious Inclination, and History of Harassment on IRMA Subscales**

Effect	Wilks' $\Lambda$	F	df	p	Partial $\eta^2$
Gender	.967	2.49	(4, 336)	.043	.033
Religious Inclination	.987	1.10	(4, 336)	.359	.013
History of Harassment	.980	1.74	(4, 336)	.140	.020
Gender $\times$ Religious Inclination $\times$ Harassment	ns	—	—	—	—

Note. ns = non-significant.

Preliminary analyses were run to check if there were any violations of the assumptions for multivariate analysis of variance and there were no serious violations of these assumptions. A three-way between groups MANOVA (Gender  $\times$  Religious inclination  $\times$  Previous history of harassment) was performed to check the differences between the four subscales of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (She asked for it, It wasn't really Rape, He didn't mean to and She lied). There was a statistically significant difference between men and women on overall rape myth acceptance:  $F(4, 336) = 2.49, p = .043,$

Wilks' Lambda=.967; partial eta squared=.033. When the subscales of the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale were considered separately, the scores were significantly different for males and females on three subscales. Women had higher scores on the subscale, 'She asked for it' ( $M=22.008, SD=0.416$ ) compared with males ( $M=18.93, SD=0.636$ ). Women also had higher scores on the subscale 'It wasn't really rape' ( $M=20.657, SD=.328$ ) than men ( $M=18.961, SD=.502$ ). Further, women also had higher scores on the third subscale 'She lied' ( $M=18.49, SD=.34$ ) as compared with men ( $M=15.38,$

$SD=.52$ ). So, overall women had higher scores on three subscales than men, showing higher rejection for rape myths.

There were no significant interaction effects among the three variables (gender, previous history of harassment and religious inclination) and there was no significant difference between those with a previous history of harassment and those without a previous history of harassment on the four subscales of the rape myth acceptance scale:  $F(4, 336) = 1.74, p = .14$ . Furthermore, there was also no significant difference among those who had a weak, moderate and strong religious inclination on rape myth acceptance:  $F(4, 336) = 1.103, p = .359$ . So, among the three factors analyzed, only gender reached statistical significance whereas religiosity and previous history of harassment were not significant and no further interaction effects were present among the factors.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to find out if gender, religious inclination and previous history of sexual harassment influenced participants' perceptions of rape myths. Data was collected from 350 undergraduate students from a private university in Lahore, Pakistan. A significant difference was found between men and women on their perceptions about rape myth acceptance whereas there was no significant difference for the groups with differing levels of religious inclination and those who had a previous history of sexual harassment. Further, no interaction effects were observed between these factors to explain the acceptance of rape myths.

The current findings revealed that overall women were more rejecting of rape myths compared with men where the partial eta squared revealed a small effect size for gender. This supports the previous findings which also found that women had a higher rape myth rejection on the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Mittal et al., 2017). The subscale 'She asked for it', contained items which reflect that the woman might have invited the perpetrator through her behavior. Women were

more rejecting on this scale indicating that they are less likely to hold the behavior of the rape victim responsible for the rape compared with men. This is consistent with recent research which suggests that men are more likely to engage in victim blaming as compared with women (Crall & Goodfriend, 2016; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2021; Strömwall et al., 2013).

One possible explanation of this finding is the underlying cognitive belief that everything happens for a reason and that people who experience positive events must be good and those who suffer negative events must be bad, termed as the just world belief (Russell & Hand, 2017). As men tend to attribute higher blame on the victim (Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2021), it is possible that they may have a stronger inclination to rely on the just world belief. The second subscale on which women had higher scores was, 'It wasn't really rape', which reflects the idea that the event that took place was not in fact rape because there isn't enough evidence or the woman did not resist the assault. Men were less rejecting of the statements on the third subscale, 'She lied' which supports the idea that the rape victim has falsely accused the perpetrator.

Both these subscales also deal with blaming the victim and excusing the behavior of the rapist, and as the victim is perceived to be a woman in this questionnaire, women are more empathetic towards the victim. This might be because they identify more with the victim because of the same gender rather than men who identify less with the victim (Ferrão & Gonçalves, 2015). There was no significant difference in the responses of men and women on the subscale, 'He didn't really mean to', which excuses the perpetrator's behavior due to the circumstances or substance abuse.

Previous research conducted in Pakistan, also confirmed that among undergraduate students, there was a higher prevalence of rape myths among men than women (Jamshed & Kamal, 2019). As the majority in Pakistan subscribe to a religion, the present study also explored if religious inclination influences the prevalence of rape myths and participants indicated if they had a strong, moderate or weak religious inclination.

Manoussaki and Hayne (2019) found that the strength of religious beliefs was positively correlated with rape myth acceptance, indicating that a stronger faith might predict higher victim blaming. Some other studies (Nagel et al., 2005) on the other hand however reported no significant impact of religiosity on rape myths, in the present study, there was no difference on rape myth acceptance among those with weak, moderate or strong religious inclination. This might be because in the present sample, very few people indicated a weak religious inclination and most students had either moderate or strong inclination.

In addition to religiosity, the present study also aimed to find if prior experience of sexual harassment influences the level of rape myth acceptance. Previous research indicates that prior history of sexual victimization makes people more sensitive to other victims of sexual assault and they are more emotionally responsive to these victims (Grandgenett et al., 2020). In the present study, there was no impact of having experienced sexual harassment on rape myth acceptance. As the sample were undergraduate students from a liberal arts university, it is possible that they may generally have a more empathetic view towards victims. As there is a widespread acknowledgement of the perspective that rape is not the victim's fault especially among young adults nowadays, it might be possible that even those who have not experienced harassment are sensitive to rape victims and have lower levels of rape myth acceptance.

The present study had a few limitations among which one was that the sample consisted of undergraduate students from a private university in Lahore. It is possible that these students may have been similar in terms of their socioeconomic background and may have similar social circles. So, it might be possible that the opinions of other undergraduate students from different universities might be different. Additionally, as this was a survey research, it could not be concluded that what factors may actually have caused a difference in the perception of rape myth acceptance. Future research should aim to use a different approach and a more diverse

sample from which conclusions about the factors which cause these differences in perspective, may be identified.

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