

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT RAPE AMONG MALE AND FEMALE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**Background:** Rape and other forms of violence against women have been reported to be common in Pakistan, and police is often reluctant to register a rape complaint. We assessed and compared the attitudes and perceptions of male and female university students towards rape of females by males. **Methods:** A cross-sectional survey with convenience sampling was conducted among the male and female students of Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. A structured, self-administered, anonymous and pre-tested questionnaire was used with close-ended questions. Students were asked about their attitudes and beliefs regarding characteristics of the female rape victims, male perpetrators and contexts in which this type of violence is more or less likely. Interviewers approached conveniently-selected participants and explained the objectives of the survey, while emphasising voluntary participation in this study. Data was analysed for frequencies and counts, while Chi-square test was used for pair-wise comparisons between male and female students with STATA 9. **Results:** Five hundred and four students, 247 male and 257 female, completed the questionnaire. Male students were more likely to believe that strong character of a woman would ostensibly shield her from the advances of a rapist; only young and pretty women get raped; woman's willingness is present in rape. About 25% of students also believed that a raped woman is not worthy of becoming another man's wife. One third of students believed that there could be no rape in marital context. **Conclusion:** Rape myths were common in our educated study respondents with significant gender differences. Attitudes and beliefs blaming the female victim of rape were more common in males.

**Keywords:** Rape, Attitudes, University Students, Pakistan

### INTRODUCTION

Lifetime prevalence of rape and attempted rape worldwide has been reported to be a staggering 20%, while gender-based violence in general against women affects over 30%.<sup>1,2</sup> Rape and other forms of violence against women have been reported to be 'rampant' in Pakistan<sup>3</sup>, and police 'often refuse to register a complaint' of rape<sup>1</sup>. Most rapes in Pakistan are never even reported.<sup>4</sup> Sexual violence including rape adversely impacts physical and mental health in women.<sup>5-7</sup>

Attitudes and beliefs of a man directly impact his risk of committing a rape on women. Acceptance by men of 'rape myths', i.e., unsubstantiated moral and cultural beliefs, can lead to justifying raping women by blaming the victim for her own victimisation.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, rape myth has been defined as 'attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression'.<sup>9</sup> A commonly used instrument measuring these myths is Burt Rape Myth Acceptance Scale<sup>8</sup>; however this scale has not been validated for use in Pakistan.

Rape myths and attitudes towards rape have not been studied in university students in Pakistan. However one convenience sample based study of 169 Asian and Caucasian college students compared beliefs about rape myths and found that Asian students were more likely to believe that rapes are committed by

strangers and that female rape victims were responsible for this behavior.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this preliminary study was to compare attitudes and perceptions of male and female university students towards rape of females by males.

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

A cross-sectional survey with convenience sampling was conducted among the male and female students of Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. A structured, self-administered, anonymous and pre-tested questionnaire was used with close-ended questions. Students were asked about their attitudes and beliefs regarding characteristics of the female rape victims, male perpetrators and contexts in which this type of violence is more or less likely.

No definition of rape was provided as it was deemed too offensive during pre-testing, with concern for substantially reducing potential response rate. Two male and female student interviewers approached conveniently-selected prospective participants of the same gender and explained the objectives of the survey while emphasising voluntary participation in this study. After obtaining verbal consent, questionnaire was distributed and the same was returned to the interviewer upon its completion.

Data was analysed for frequencies and counts, while Chi-square test was used for pair-wise comparisons between male and female students with STATA-9.

**RESULTS**

Five hundred and four students, 247 male and 257 female, completed the questionnaire, none of the approached students declined to participate in this study. The mean age of male students was 23.3 year (range: 20–40 yr), and of female students was 22.6 year (range: 20–40 yr). Most students, (355, 70.4%) were enrolled in the masters program, 129 (25.6%) in M. Phil program while the rest were doctoral students. Table-1 lists all questions asked pertaining to attitudes and perceptions regarding characteristics of the rape victims, perpetrators and contexts of this type of violence by gender along with statistical significance of the difference between two gender groups.

Rampant misconceptions with significant gender differences were found in this study. Male students were more likely to believe that strong character of a woman would ostensibly shield her from the advances of a rapist; only young and pretty women get raped; woman’s willingness is present in rape; woman gets pleasure during the act of rape; rape happens outside home in dark and deserted places, and that a woman tempts a man into raping her by the way she either dresses or behaves. More women than men believed that women who stayed within the confines of her home could also be raped. The only statistically insignificant observation found was that rape is less prevalent in eastern society, as almost half of all students believed it to be true. About 25% of students also believed that a raped woman is not worthy of becoming another man’s wife. One-third of students believed that there could be no rape in marital context.

**DISCUSSION**

This is the first study in Pakistan to document the self reported attitudes and beliefs in university students regarding characteristics of the female rape victims, male perpetrators and contexts in which rape occurs. The results depicting rampant misconceptions with significant gender differences are disturbing and especially more so shocking against the backdrop of young age and high educational background of our respondents.

Over 63% of males and 20% of females believed that if a woman has strong character, no one could rape her. We did not define character but several studies report that women with large number of dating/sexual partners tend to report high sexual assault rates.<sup>11-12</sup> Hence women who chose to voluntarily have several sexual partners tend to be perceived as more likely to fall victim of rape. Another common myth is that a woman tempts a man into raping her by the way she dresses or that a woman can not be raped against her will.<sup>9,13,14</sup> About half of the respondents in this study subscribed to the belief that a woman tempts a man into

raping her by the way she dresses, and over 10% believed that a woman cannot be raped against her will; all these elements comprise rape myth.<sup>9</sup>

**Table-1: Attitudes and perceptions about rape by gender**

Question	Male (n=247)	Female n=257
<b>If a woman has a strong character, no one could rape her?</b>		
Agree	157	52
Disagree	90	205
p-value	<0.0005	
<b>Rape is committed by strangers?</b>		
Agree	76	46
Disagree	171	211
p-value	0.001	
<b>No man could rape his sister or daughter?</b>		
Agree	195	92
Disagree	52	165
p-value	<0.0005	
<b>There can be rape in marital relationship?</b>		
Agree	148	189
Disagree	99	68
p-value	0.001	
<b>Rape happens outside home, in dark and deserted areas?</b>		
Agree	105	80
Disagree	142	177
p-value	0.008	
<b>A curse like rape is less prevalent in an eastern society?</b>		
Agree	131	115
Disagree	116	142
p-value	0.063	
<b>Only young and beautiful women get raped?</b>		
Agree	65	13
Disagree	182	244
p-value	<0.0005	
<b>A woman’s willingness is present in rape?</b>		
Agree	47	5
Disagree	200	252
p-value	<0.0005	
<b>Woman who is raped is not worthy of being another man’s wife?</b>		
Agree	78	51
Disagree	169	206
p-value	0.003	
<b>Woman who stayed within the four walls of her house can also be raped?</b>		
Agree	146	213
Disagree	101	44
p-value	<0.0005	
<b>Woman gets pleasure during rape?</b>		
Agree	63	8
Disagree	184	249
p-value	<0.0005	
<b>Woman tempts a man into raping her through her behavior and way she dresses?</b>		
Agree	158	90
Disagree	89	167
p-value	<0.0005	

The p values apply to pair-wise comparison between males and females

Over 24% of respondents believed that rape is committed by strangers, but 60–80% of rape victims report offender being a relative or a friend.<sup>15</sup> Two-thirds of respondents believed that there can be no rape in a marital relationship. But marital rape defined as non-

consensual sex with one's wife was reported by over 77% of married men based on a sample of 70, while about 47% of married women reportedly experienced it in a study based on 216 married women in Pakistan.<sup>16-17</sup>

More women than men believed that women who stayed within the confines of her home could also be raped. The only statistically insignificant observation found was that rape is less prevalent in eastern society, as almost half of both gender groups believed it to be true. About 25% of students also believed that a raped woman is not worthy of becoming another man's wife; this is the most disturbing result observed in this study, as it identifies the misconception in a very educated segment of our population that believes a woman although being a victim of a serious crime nonetheless has to bear the social stigma, ostracizing, and shame. This attitude in our respondents underscores the pervasiveness of under reporting of this crime in our society.

However, results from this study need to be interpreted with caveats. A major limitation of this study is the non-randomized sample which restricts generalizability of results as representative of either university students in Pakistan or in the city in which this study was performed. This also limits comparisons with other studies using standardised instruments, as our instrument's reliability and validity was not determined. This was a preliminary study providing impetus for indigenously developed standardised scales to study rape myths in our socio-cultural context; in nationwide population based surveys.

## CONCLUSION

Rape myths were common in our educated study respondents with significant gender differences. Attitudes and beliefs blaming the female victim of rape were more common in males. Effective health education campaigns focusing on unlearning these attitudes need to be launched, and population based surveys need to be

conducted to determine the extent and pervasiveness of these erroneous attitudes in Pakistan.

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