

Using feminist theory to understand male rape

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Decades of feminist research have framed rape and sexual assault as a 'women's issue', leaving little room for the experiences of male victims. But a new study published in the Journal of Gender Studies suggests that feminist theory, with its focus on the gendered nature of rape, can also help us understand the stigmas, social constructions and realities associated with male rape.

Aliraza Javaid of the University of York writes: 'Feminism conceptualises rape as a violent act which, along with a consideration of hegemonic masculinity, may help us understand why male rape has been widely overlooked and discover whether social and gender expectations facilitate this neglect.'

He adds: 'How a man perceives himself as a man and in what ways masculinities are formed within a social and cultural setting are vital to understanding male rape.'

To illustrate these points, Javaid refers to the work of key feminist scholars throughout his article, highlighting how some of the central notions – power, control, hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy – can produce difficulties for understanding male rape. Crucially, a focus on men as aggressors has meant less time spent focusing on men as victims and the consequent neglect of male victims as a subject for empirical study. The emphasis on rape as a women's concern has also created practical problems for male victims, such as a shortage of male police officers trained to help them and fewer means of support.

Javaid discusses in detail how cultural 'expectations' of men and masculinity pose challenges for dealing with male rape. The widespread belief that men cannot be raped – either by women or other men – as well as the expectation that men do not show emotion may contribute to the fact that men report rape at much lower rates than women. Falling victim to a crime that generally affects women challenges notions of 'hegemonic masculinity' and male power: male [rape victims](#) 'are judged, and judge themselves' to be 'failed [men](#)' for not fighting off perpetrators.

Javaid concludes that the widespread neglect of male [sexual assault](#) by scholars 'functions to maintain and reinforce patriarchal power relations and hegemonic masculinities'. But even worse than that, such neglect of the male experience of rape undermines the cause of gender equality for which so many strive.

This article is essential reading for Gender Studies scholars as well as those involved in supporting victims of rape – of either sex.

More information: "Feminism, masculinity and male rape: bringing male rape 'out of the closet.'" *Journal of Gender Studies*. Published online: 17 Sep 2014. [DOI: 10.1080/09589236.2014.959479](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2014.959479)

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