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Lilley, C., Willmott, D., Mojtahedi, D. et al. (2023) Intimate partner rape: a review of six core myths surrounding women's conduct and the consequences of intimate partner rape. *Social Sciences*, 12 (1). 34. ISSN: 2076-0760

<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12010034>

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Review

# Intimate Partner Rape: A Review of Six Core Myths Surrounding Women's Conduct and the Consequences of Intimate Partner Rape

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**Abstract:** The focus of this paper is to highlight and review the evidence surrounding common intimate partner rape (IPR) myths, their prevalence in society, and identify those who are most likely to endorse such beliefs. Six core IPR myths are discussed related to misconceptions surrounding (1) women's decisions to remain in abusive relationships, (2) why women delay or never report IPR, (3) women's perceived motivations when an IPR report is made, (4) a perceived lack of trauma that occurs as a consequence of this type of rape, (5) male sexual entitlement within intimate relationships, and (6) whether it is even possible to rape a marital partner. This article draws together a wealth of studies and research that evidence why such IPR myths are indeed factually inaccurate and examines how victims, justice professionals, police practitioners, and legal decision-makers endorsement of false beliefs pertaining to intimate partner rape serve to hinder various justice pathways. We discuss the consequences of rape mythology in so far as they create social barriers that prohibit the reporting of rape, impact the progression of an allegation through the criminal justice system and ultimately, obstruct rape victims' access to justice. The review concludes by considering evidence regarding the possible benefits of education interventions in reducing the problematic influence of rape myths.

**Keywords:** intimate partner rape; violence against women; rape myths; sexual victimisation



**Citation:** Lilley, Caroline, Dominic Willmott, Dara Mojtahedi, and Danielle Labhardt. 2023. Intimate Partner Rape: A Review of Six Core Myths Surrounding Women's Conduct and the Consequences of Intimate Partner Rape. *Social Sciences* 12: 34. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12010034>

Academic Editor: Nigel Parton

Received: 5 November 2022

Revised: 21 December 2022

Accepted: 26 December 2022

Published: 4 January 2023



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Prevalence of Sexual Violence against Women

Sexual violence against women is an ongoing global health crisis of epidemic proportions. Global statistics now display one in three women will experience some form of sexual or physical violence during their lifetime (WHO 2013, 2017), with emerging evidence indicating substantial increases in violence against women globally, particularly within the home, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (UN Women 2020). The long-term consequences for survivors of sexual violence are well documented, affecting physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, personality functioning and social readjustments long after the victimisation has stopped (Boduszek et al. 2019b; Jones 2013; Kaufman et al. 2019; Mason and Lodrick 2013). Whilst figures indicate greater prevalence in low- and middle-income regions such as South East Asia, Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean, women in higher-income regions within Europe also experience high rates of sexual victimisation (WHO 2013). In England and Wales (E&W) alone figures indicate that approximately 510,000 women are sexually victimized each year (ONS 2018). Despite this, less than one in six victims will formally report their experience to the police (MoJ 2013; ONS 2018). A multitude of reasons explain low rates of reporting including fear of being disbelieved, trauma associated with re-living the offence during police questioning, and belief in socially

embedded misconceptions which lead survivors to blame themselves for what happened (Hohl and Stanko 2015; Widanaralage et al. 2022).

Whilst it is understood that sexual violence is experienced by both men and women, it is a crisis overwhelmingly borne by women. Globally, men are predominately the perpetrators of sexual offences and women most often those victimized. Recent figures in E&W highlight that 98% of those prosecuted for the most serious sexual offences were male, with females accounting for 84% of those experiencing such violence (CPS 2019). Figures also display that for the small proportion of women who do come forward to report serious sexual victimisation, the likelihood of attaining justice within in the criminal justice system is extremely low (Hohl and Stanko 2015; Willmott et al. 2021). Despite police in E&W formally recorded 55,130 allegations of rape between April 2019 and March 2020 (ONS 2020), just 2102 cases (3.8%) resulted in prosecutions and only 1439 cases (2.6%) concluded with a conviction for rape (or a lesser offence) over the same time period (CPS 2020).

### *1.2. Intimate Partner Sexual Violence*

Regarding victim-offender relationships, crime data continues to display that perpetrators of sexual violence are frequently intimately acquainted with their victims. Contrary to popular belief, a reported eight out of ten rapes perpetrated against women and girls across middle- and high-income western countries, are committed by a person known to the victim, while stranger rapes account for just a small proportion of recorded rape offences (CPS 2017; DoJ 2017; RAINN 2019; Waterhouse et al. 2016). However, it is important to note that data suggests a quite different victim-offender profile among male rape victims, with stranger rapes against single men being much more prevalent (see Murphy et al. 2022). Globally, 30% of women who have been in an intimate relationship report having experienced sexual and domestic violence at the hands of an intimate partner (Peterman et al. 2015; WHO 2017) and in E&W, more than half of all serious sexual offences (56%) are committed by a current or former partner (MoJ 2013). Again, data reveals IPR (i.e., rape perpetrated by a person with whom the victim/survivor is or has previously been in some form of intimate relationship with) is a burden most often borne by women. In fact, crime figures indicate women experience IPR at a rate of five times that of men (ONS 2018; Rothman et al. 2003). Figures also display IPR (sometimes termed domestic rape) is particularly pervasive within same-sex relationships. Compared to 35% of heterosexual women, 44% of lesbian women and 61% of bisexual women report experiences of IPR and physical violence (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, NCADV 2018). Whilst beyond the scope and focus of the present review, it is important to recognize that gay and bisexual men report comparable rates of intimate partner sexual violence as women within same-sex relationships (NCADV 2018).

Clearly prevalence data and crime statistics highlight women's over-representation as victims of the most serious forms of sexual violence, frequently at the hands of intimate partners. National crime surveys and attrition statistics also lay bare low rates of reporting and even lower rates of prosecutions and convictions for rape offences in E&W. Vast theorizing and empirical research has sought to understand the pervasive nature of sexual offending by deconstructing the sociocultural processes and belief systems which serve to normalize such violence. In seeking to explain rape attrition rates within the criminal justice system, a multitude of studies have examined the barriers which preclude rape victims/survivors from accessing justice. Today, empirical evidence lends substantial support to the premise that, widespread gender inequality and male dominance fosters social and cultural acceptance of sexual violence against women and the misconceptions which surround sexual offences such as rape. The prominence of factually incorrect, universally applied assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes surrounding the circumstances within which rape and sexual violence occur, appear to facilitate societal tolerance of aggressive sexual behaviours. In turn, this serves to both normalize sexual victimisation and misinform the public and professionals about the realities of rape, impacting their judgements and

opinions surrounding such cases. The varied and multifaceted misconceptions surrounding rape and sexual violence are broadly conceptualized as rape myths.

## 2. Rape Myths: Definitions, Functions, and Prevalence

The term “rape myth” first emerged in the late 1970s after researchers began to recognize that people often expressed beliefs about rape and sexual violence that were untrue (Brownmiller 1975; Estrich 1976). Taking account of the importance of stereotypes and myths, Martha Burt (1980) was the first to define rape myths as “prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, rape victims and rapists” (p. 217). Gaining prominence thereafter, rape myths and the endorsement of commonly held false beliefs pertaining to rape and sexual violence have been extensively researched. Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) instead highlight the common and enduring nature of rape myths, as well as the cultural function that such myths often serve (e.g., denial and justification). They defined Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) as the measurable extent to which individuals endorse “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false, but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression” (p. 134). Varying definitions and attempts to identify specific rape myths have emerged since, though four core categories are typically conceptualized; (1) beliefs that blame the victim, (2) beliefs that doubt the allegations, (3) beliefs that excuse the accused, and (4) beliefs that pre-define rape to specific conditions and individuals (Bohner et al. 2005). These categories of rape myths, Gerd Bohner and colleagues argue, are both prescriptive and descriptive in nature. Subscription to such myths functions as an interpretive schema that guides the perceptions surrounding rape case evidence and information (Bohner et al. 2005; Gerger et al. 2007). As such, rape myths serve to both predispose and bias judgements about who may be lying and telling the truth (Willmott et al. 2021).

Research examining the existence and influence of rape myths is now vast and empirical evidence is reliable enough to conclude that widespread endorsement of rape mythology spans varied societies, cultures, and distinct social groups (Debowska et al. 2018; Grubb and Turner 2012; Johnson and Beech 2017; Labhardt et al. 2017; Parsons and Mojtahedi 2022; Suarez and Gadalla 2010). Some research has sought to better understand rape myths beliefs by exploring individual differences in the likelihood of subscribing to them. Studies consistently report heightened endorsement among older males, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those who also endorse stereotypical racist and sexist beliefs (Suarez and Gadalla 2010; Anderson et al. 1997). In fact, whilst clearly, a complex relationship exists interacting and moderated by a range of other psychosocial variables (see Hockett et al. 2016 for a comprehensive review), rape myths are consistently more pervasive among males than females. Whilst women do often endorse particular types of rape myths, generally, men are found to exhibit higher RMA scores than women—within community settings (Grubb and Turner 2012), student samples (Hayes et al. 2013), and in particular, within male-dominated settings such as college fraternities (Hayes et al. 2016), prison environments (Debowska et al. 2016), religious groups (Barnett et al. 2018) and the military (Carroll et al. 2016). Though some research has demonstrated a degree of association between rape myth beliefs and observer age (Yarmey 1985), ethnicity (Mori et al. 1995), and religiosity (Barnett et al. 2018), this relationship is not consistently supported elsewhere in the literature (see Hockett et al. 2016). Indeed, the link between rape myth endorsement and religiousness is not linear. Recent research indicates that whilst rigid adherence and extrinsically motivated religious beliefs are associated with increased rape myth endorsement, broader religious motivations characterized by openness and exploration were found to be negatively associated with rape myth beliefs (Ensz and Jankowski 2020). That said, high-profile rapes still occur among certain religious groups, especially those with rigid rules which govern interactions between the sexes and which seem to condone sexual violence as a permissible punishment for deviating from such socio-cultural rules (see Willmott et al. 2021). In fact, rape has long been used as a punishment frequently leveraged against women for some perceived wrongdoing. Modern and ancient history

provide numerous accounts of rape being perceived and implemented as a legitimate weapon of war. The consequences of which are shown to be life-long and intergenerational (Jones et al. 2014) and which inevitably thereby serve to explain why many victim-survivors continue to choose not to disclose their experiences.

Given the pervasiveness of rape myths throughout global societies, concerns continue to surround the prejudicial impact they may have upon complainant allegations and legal decisions within global justice systems. A concern not lacking empirical support. One common function or use of rape myths evidenced in various psycho-legal research is to undermine the credibility, character and version of events put forward by rape complainants (Ellison 2019; Ellison and Munro 2009b; Krahe et al. 2008; Powell et al. 2013). Rape myths serving this function are frequently applied within legal settings; with a plethora of recent evidence reporting police (Murphy and Hine 2019), prosecutors (Zvi and Shechory-Bitton 2022), lawyers (Smith and Skinner 2017), and juries (Devine and Mojtahedi 2021; Stevens et al. 2022) utilize such myths in their effort to make sense of complainant evidence (discussed in more detail in Section 5 below).

Another common function that rape myths serve is to trivialize and deny the prevalence and severity of the offence of rape. Burt (1980) defined this as a “mechanism that people use to justify dismissing an incident of sexual assault, from the category of ‘real rape’” (p. 27). The intention of such is arguably to protect and preserve society and oneself from the reality that sexual violence is commonplace (Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994; Smith and Skinner 2017). Trivialization of rape occurs by transferring the blame from the perpetrator to the victim (Krahe et al. 2008; Sommer et al. 2016). Resultantly, rape myths have been described by some as an example of the “just world phenomenon” in action; where individuals actively search for causal explanations to account for occurrences that are otherwise difficult to accept. Moreover, when presented with an instance of rape, particularly between individuals previously intimately acquainted, this generally means drawing upon available rape myths and scripts to justify and down play the sexual violence as some consequence of victim’s own actions; her clothing, her voluntary intoxication, her incautious behaviour, etc. Dominant thinking suggests this serves to protect the individual’s sense of a ‘just world’ where bad things only happen to bad people or in the case of rape, people who were in some way responsible for their victimisation. As such, rape myths appear to be adopted as “anxiety buffers” (Langevoort 1998). Indeed, some thinking suggests rape myths often, therefore, have a self-serving function by which women are able to psychologically distance themselves from the perceived threat of being raped (i.e., I would fight off an attacker or I wouldn’t put myself in such a vulnerable situation) and for men, distance their sexual experiences and behaviour from those which would be considered rape (i.e., women often say no when really they mean yes but don’t want to come across as easy) (Burrowes 2013; Gerger et al. 2007; Hockett et al. 2016). Alternatively, women who reject such myths likely construe rape to be a threat to all women, including themselves (Gerger et al. 2007). It is however important to note that men and boys can and do experience sexual victimisation. The legislative and societal framing of men as likely or potential rapists serves to discourage male victims of rape from reporting their experiences and indeed themselves believing that they are true and worthy victims (for more detailed recent discussions refer to Sowersby et al. 2022 and Widanaralalage et al. 2022).

Beyond the prevalent and persistent nature of rape myth beliefs (see Table 1 for a list of widely held rape myth beliefs), the most problematic feature of rape mythology is the universal application of such myths as a singular explanation for all instances and allegations of rape, disregarding situational and individual differences that frequently occur. As Leverick (2020) articulates perfectly “the vast majority—if not all—beliefs that are described as rape myths are false if they are expressed as general statements applicable to all rape cases, even if they might be true in a smaller sub-set of cases” (p. 3).

**Table 1.** Commonly Endorsed Rape Myths.

Common Rape Myths	
1.	“Real rape” occurs between strangers and usually involves some form of violence.
2.	“Real rape” victims fight off their attackers, often have injuries which prove they’ve been raped and report the rape immediately afterwards.
3.	False allegations of rape are common and usually occur after a woman has had consensual sex but later regrets it.
4.	Allegations of rape between people who know each other are usually the result of some miscommunication or misunderstanding and ought not to be considered rape.
5.	Being raped by someone you know is less traumatic than being raped by a stranger.
6.	Women invite rape by the way they dress, how they act, how much alcohol they consume or how many sexual partners they’ve had.
7.	Only gay men are raped; heterosexual men are not.
8.	Rape only occurs because men cannot control their sexual urges once ignited by a woman.

### 3. Aims of the Current Review

Here, forward, the focus of this article is to review existing empirical evidence surrounding prominent myths pertaining to intimate partner rape (IPR). The review will draw together research evidence in respect of five commonly cited and widely endorsed myths which surround domestic and IPR, examining the broader consequences of such beliefs upon victims and survivors’ ability to report the abuse and leave sexually violent relationships. Myths surrounding to the perceived level of trauma victims/survivors’ experience after being raped by an intimate partner, their motivations for alleging partner rape, and reasons why victims/survivors may delay reporting and choose to remain within a sexually violent relationship are also discussed. The consequences of these myths in terms of the challenges they pose for rape case progression (and broader attrition) through the criminal justice system are also examined.

### 4. Intimate Partner Rape: Empirically Examining the Myths and Realities

#### 4.1. “Women Who Are Genuinely Raped by Their Partners Don’t Stay in a Relationship with Them, They Leave and Immediately Report Their Victimization to the Police”

One of the most common myths pertaining to IPR and in fact intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence more broadly, is the belief that victims can leave abusive partners and relationships easily though frequently choose not to (Debowska et al. 2019; Eckstein 2011; Herman 2019). Observers routinely question why victims and survivors of partner abuse remain in violent relationships, a question which implies victims are in some way to blame for their victimisation or are enabling the abuse, and thereby shifts focus away from the culpability of the perpetrator (Enander 2010; Jones and Jemmott 2014). Leaving an abusive relationship, especially where sexual violence has occurred, is regarded as a necessity to ensure safety, physical health and emotional well-being (Bell et al. 2007). Yet, as Ramsey (2013) highlights, improvements in victim advocacy and the range of support available to IPV victims emerging from state and charitable services, has seemingly contributed to the illusion that it is ‘no longer’ difficult for women to exit abusive relationships. Misconceptions surrounding survivors access to and awareness of support available and an apparent overestimation of the resources available to target and support IPV survivors, have indeed resulted in further barriers (and newly embedded myths) that serve to “trap” women within abusive relationships (Eckstein 2011; Zink et al. 2003).

The complex and cumbersome nature of leaving a violent relationship is well- documented within survivor literature. Described as an enduring combination of psychological and physical separation (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Enander 2010, 2011; Scheffer Lind-

gren and Renck 2008) vast research shows that a woman's ability to leave a violent partner is restricted by a multitude of internal factors (e.g., emotional attachment, fear of being alone, belief that the offender will change) and external factors (e.g., lack of independent resources, poor mobility and opportunity/access to employment and education, isolation from support networks) (Edin and Nilsson 2013; Herman 2019; Lacey et al. 2011; Payne and Wermeling 2009). Barriers to help-seeking which recent research finds are exacerbated for women from immigrant women and women from minority ethnic groups (Hulley et al. 2022). Indeed, studies among offending populations show that IPV offenders are acutely aware of the barriers that women face when attempting to leave a violent relationship and actively seek to leverage these against victim/survivors to prevent them leaving the relationship (Kirkman et al. 2021; Hulley et al. 2022). One common explanation for remaining with a sexually abusive partner, is a lack of financial sustainability. Bell et al. (2007) found that 57% of a low-income, minority ethnic sample of IPV victims were entirely economically dependent upon their abusive partner, including for their access to basic resources such as food, clothing, and medication. Likewise, Scheffer Lindgren and Renck (2008) found fear of financial uncertainty to be the central component hindering women's ability to exit abusive relationships. In a study by Edin and Nilsson (2013), restricted access to finances, a lack of means of communicating with the outside world, as well as restricted or limited access to transport, were frequently reported to be factors which perpetrators often leveraged in their efforts to coerce compliance and prevent their partners from leaving.

A wealth of research has shown that belief in the myth that it is now easy for women to leave abusive relationships remains prevalent throughout Western society, even among professionals that work closely with victim/survivors. Black et al. (2010) assessed the views of 124 early career social workers about the perceived dynamics and recommended interventions for intimate partner sexual violence. Although it is important to recognize that those interviewed were still in training at the time of the study, most recommended the immediate removal of women from the abusive environment, failing to acknowledge risk factors associated with doing so and the barriers which prevented an immediate exit. Within legal settings, Temkin et al. (2018) also found evidence that lawyers in England often drew upon the failure to leave a violent relationship myth in an attempt to discredit complainant accounts of IPV during trial. Invoking the myth that a 'real rape victim' would immediately remove herself from an abusive household and relationship, the authors conclude that defence barristers sought to discredit the veracity of complainant's allegations by persuading jurors that this was both abnormal and suspicious—despite evidence to the contrary.

In general, research has found that the failure to leave myth is most commonly endorsed among men, those with low levels of educational attainment, and unsurprisingly, those who use violence within their own relationships (Bryant and Spencer 2003; Worden and Carlson 2005). Reduced IPV victim empathy is also considered an important determinant of belief in such myths (Debowska et al. 2019). Some argue that a lack of exposure to the problem of intimate partner violence appear associated with endorsement of such IPV myths. Bryant and Spencer (2003) found that individuals with experience of violence exposure within the family were less likely to ascribe blame for IPV towards the victim and had a better appreciation of the barriers preventing the victim from exiting such a relationship. However, a range of more recent studies seem to contradict this finding. Instead, recent research among children and young people (CYP) has shown that childhood exposure to domestic violence in the home, in fact leads to more problematic IPV attitudes and violence-supportive cognitions among CYP, than those without such domestic violence exposure (Debowska et al. 2021; Fray et al. Forthcoming; Sharratt et al. 2022). As such, the potential for early educational intervention which seeks to increase victim empathy and challenge rape mythology among children and adolescents is crucial. Evaluations of existing interventions tasked with improving empathy towards victims of gender-based violence provide early signs of effectiveness, especially when using innovative and engaging

technologies as the mechanism by which training is delivered (see [Boduszek et al. 2019a](#); [Hudspith et al. 2021](#); [Lundgren and Amin 2015](#)). Alongside engaging interventions, tools such as the *NI3 Victim Responsiveness Assessment*, developed by [Debowska et al. \(2019\)](#) to measure empathic responsiveness towards victims of intimate partner violence, offer a valuable standardized means by which prevention programs can be evaluated.

Another harmful component of the aforementioned IPV rape myth is the notion that women raped by their partners will immediately report their victimisation. A plethora of research has shown how important criminal justice figures, especially police officers who hold a significant “gate-keeping” role, are misguided by this belief ([Frazier and Haney 1996](#); [Spohn and Tellis 2019](#)). Research by [Maddox et al. \(2011\)](#) investigating police perceptions of IPR discovered that 40% of officers believed a victim to be more credible if she reported her attack immediately afterwards. It is important to recognize here that UK government estimates and independent academic research universally agree that less than one in six victims of sexual violence will ever formally report their experiences to the authorities ([ONS 2018](#); [Waterhouse et al. 2016](#); [Widanaralalage et al. 2022](#)). Vast research with rape victims generally confirms that individual responses to rape will vary, and a delay in reporting is indeed a more frequent, typical response to experiencing sexual violence than an immediate phone call to the police ([Mason and Lodrick 2013](#); [Willmott et al. 2021](#)). In an attempt to deal with such widely held misconceptions, trial judges in E&W now frequently warn jurors against the endorsement of this myth within rape trials ([Ellison 2019](#)). Indeed, evidence displays IPR victims are found to be more inclined to delay reporting their experience to authorities due to their intimate relationship with the perpetrator, and in most instances will never formally report the abuse ([Edin and Nilsson 2013](#)). IPR victims may not in fact recognize their abuse as rape, or indeed may view a non-consensual sexual act as less problematic than the physical domestic violence that they are experiencing. This important finding recently re-emerged in research by [Kirkman et al. \(2021\)](#), whose interviews with IPV survivors about their physical partner abuse experiences, led to several descriptions of recurring and systematic rape perpetrated against them by their intimate partners. Whilst some recognized this as rape, most did not, with the absence of physical force and violence during non-consensual sexual intercourse seemingly being the main reason for defining the abuse in this way. Clearly, such perceptions of what constitutes ‘real rape’ impacts the rate at which IPR is reported to authorities and captured within non-reported crime victimisation surveys. Moreover, survivors who do recognize their rape as such, often explain that as their experience does not conform to “real rape” stereotypes (i.e., perpetrated by a stranger, includes use of physical violence and force in the commission of the offence), they would be less likely to be believed by authorities if reported ([Enander 2011](#); [Flood and Pease 2009](#)). Indeed, studies by [Hine and Murphy \(2019\)](#) and [Murphy and Hine \(2019\)](#) demonstrates how police officers routinely draw upon rape myths when making critical judgements regarding victim credibility, perpetrator responsibility, and case authenticity. Their findings indicate that officers categorized as “high scoring” in their endorsement of rape myths, rated victims as more responsible for the offence, and perpetrators as less responsible, and judges rape allegations as being less authentic overall. Given that police are the first responders after an allegation of rape is made, such findings indicate how police officers’ endorsement of rape myths may impact upon investigative decisions and victim’s experiences at the point of reporting.

#### *4.2. “Being Raped by a Partner or Somebody You Know Is Less Traumatic Than Being Raped by a Stranger”*

Another persistently held myth pertaining to IPR is the belief that the act itself and the subsequent psychological, emotional, and physical consequences, are less severe for IPR victims than those emerging as a consequence of stranger rape. This belief is seemingly rooted in the assumption that being raped by a person you do not know is more traumatic than if the offender is a current or former intimate partner. However, research among IPR

victims and survivors indicates comparable rates of psychological trauma and emotional distress and in many instances, worse physical and mental health outcomes emerging as a consequence of partner rape (Ansara and Hindin 2011; Campbell 2002; Sheilds and Hanneke 1992). A study by Temple et al. (2007) found that intimate partner victim-offender relationship was a significant predictor of negative mental health consequences; that is, victims of IPR were more likely to experience severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptomatology and diagnoses than victims of non-partner rapes. This is not to suggest that the consequences associated with familial, stranger, or acquaintance rape are not severe or endorsing as indeed evidence clearly indicates that they are but serves to highlight that in many ways, sexual abuse by an intimate partner appears to have additional negative psychological and physical health outcomes for survivors, thereby debunking misconceptions surrounding this myth. Moreover, simultaneous physical and sexual assaults are found to be more frequent within intimate relationships (Seyller et al. 2016). Bergen (1995) found that women assaulted within sexually and physically violent relationships, were often raped more than 20 times, the multifaceted and complex nature of trauma assaulted with such abuse is self-evident. Likewise, Du Mont et al. (2017) concluded that victims of IPR were indeed more likely to sustain physical injuries due to their repeated abuse. Specifically, IPR survivors were found to be significantly more likely to experience both vaginal and anal rape, as well as physical coercion, and verbal abuse than all other rape victim groups.

Nonetheless, studies continue to evidence widespread endorsement of this myth. Research conducted with university students in the US Mid-West found that when presented with either marital or stranger rape vignettes, participants invoked a range of myths and stereotypes in an effort to dismiss the veracity of the marital rape allegation (Monson et al. 1996). Overall, this study found participants rated IPR to be less serious and traumatic than stranger rape. Importantly, however, gender appears to be an important moderator of such attitudes. Female participants viewed rape as a serious violation regardless of victim-perpetrator relationship and yet both male and female participants believed married men to be acting in accordance with normal gender roles when evaluating rape type, a point used to reduce and excuse the perpetrator culpability. Likewise, more recent studies have shown that rape myths were more readily drawn upon and frequently applied when making judgements about IPR complainant credibility, believability, and assigning blame attributions compared to defendants and non-IPR victim allegations (Ellison and Munro 2013; Ferro et al. 2008; Hester and Lilley 2017; Lilley et al. Forthcoming). The prevailing consensus between studies thereby indicating that IPR's, particularly those that occur between marital partners, are viewed as "accidental" and less traumatic than "genuine" rapes perpetrated by non-intimate partners.

According with broader rape myth endorsement literature, this myth is more likely to be endorsed by males than females (Ferro et al. 2008) and male participants are more likely to rate IPR's as less serious and traumatic than other rape types, with complainant's rated as more blameworthy for their victimisation than ratings made by female participants (Monson et al. 2000). Similarly, earlier research by Bridges (1991) found that despite both men and women's perceptions of IPR incorporating more rigid sex role expectations than stranger rape, rape supportive beliefs were much stronger and more enduring in males. This may be explained in part, by the gendered nature of sexual violence, that generally involves female victims and male perpetrators, embedded within societies that subscribe to and accept a culture of male (sexual) dominance within dating relationships (see Sowersby et al. 2022). Furthermore, crime data and empirical research continue to display that sexual assault and rape offences perpetrated by an intimate partner, result in significantly higher rates of case attrition when compared to other sexual offence perpetrator groupings. Where rape allegations are made against individuals with whom previous consensual sexual interactions have occurred, and in partner former or current intimate partners, cases are less likely to progress through various stages of the CJS and more likely to be judged with scepticism and doubt by legal decision-makers (Ellison and Munro 2013;

Hester and Lilley 2017; Hohl and Stanko 2015). A wealth of research indicates that important criminal justice figures, particularly police officers and jurors, rely heavily upon rape myths and normative sexual scripts when forming judgements about believability and culpability (Ellison and Munro 2009a, 2009b; Hudspith et al. 2021; Lea et al. 2016; Willmott et al. 2018). A major problem considering IPR's do not conform to "real rape" stereotypes. Lea et al. (2003) found that police officers that held strong traditional views were less likely to empathize with IPR victims and more likely to dismiss allegations as false reports. The endorsement of such myths during the initial stages of the CJS obstructs the progression of such cases from reporting to conviction. Research by Lynch et al. (2019) concluded that when presented with alternative less serious charging options (intimate partner rape versus sexual misconduct), less participants were willing to convict the defendant of (intimate partner) rape in the first degree, despite strong evidence of culpability. Results indicate that even when both male and female mock jurors believed that a rape offence had occurred, they were less willing to convict for the offence of rape when the perpetrator was an intimate partner rather than a stranger.

#### 4.3. "Women Often Accuse Their Partner of Rape in Revenge after a Failed Relationship or as a Way of Getting Custody of Their Children"

The belief that women persistently lie about rape and that high rates of false allegations are made is a longstanding myth given the lack of corroborating evidence. Sentiments surrounding the rate at which false allegations are presumed to be made are not difficult to come by. Sir Matthew Hale, a 17th century legal scholar, described rape as "an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proved, and harder to be defended by the party accused..." (cited by Rumney 2006). Whilst difficult to conclusively ascertain, public and media representations of the rate at which false allegations of rape occur are significantly overinflated when compared against socio-legal scholars' estimations (Gavey and Gow 2001; Kelly et al. 2005; Kelly 2010). Indeed, studies conclude false allegation estimates are also substantially over-estimated among police professionals (Jordan 2004; Saunders 2012). Data indicate that police officers estimate false allegations of rape to account for between 5–90% of all rape allegations (McMillan 2018; Venema 2016). Burton et al. (1998) demonstrated that public perceptions surrounding the prevalence with which false reporting is thought to occur also exist more widely throughout Western societies. The authors found 78% of respondents believed that women falsely "cry rape" against men in an act of revenge for failed relationships. Whilst recent studies suggest public perceptions towards rape victims are no longer quite so problematic (see Smith et al. 2022), with some recent evidence indicating that rape myth beliefs may well be decreasing (Byrne et al. 2021; Thelan and Meadows 2021), misconceptions surrounding the rate of false rape allegations made by disgruntled women following a relationship breakdown persist—seemingly among the police.

Police expect genuine rape victims to adhere to stereotypical victim scripts and behaviours (Gunby et al. 2013). When individuals go against these stereotypes, reports are perceived as false. Victim credibility plays a significant role in police officer's perceptions of legitimacy; complainants who were inconsistent, not visibly distressed or delayed reporting or were judged to have something to gain by reporting (e.g., custody, revenge for relationship breakdown) are perceived as suspicious (Jordan 2004; Lisak et al. 2010; Venema 2016). As research continues to demonstrate that police officers are likely to endorse "real rape" stereotypes, non-conforming rape types that include an intimate partner victim-perpetrator relationship are more likely to be judged as false (Lisak et al. 2010; McMillan 2018). For instance, Jordan (2004) reported that 83% of rape complainants who had a prior relationship with the person that they had accused, were viewed as suspicious. Indeed, a plethora of studies suggest that the most commonly cited reasons for making a false allegation, are women's desire to punish and/or obtain revenge against a former intimate partner (Gunby et al. 2013; Kelly et al. 2005; Venema 2016). This profound scepticism towards female rape complainants is historically reflective of a deep distrust of "deceitful and vengeful" women (Rumney 2006). This fear continues to create legal barriers that serve to

prevent the progression of non-conformist ‘real rape’ cases, from progressing through the criminal justice system, such as the use of marital rape exemptions in the US that protects marital partners from being accused of rape.

Importantly, a plethora of research reveals that false allegations of rape, are no higher than false allegations of any other crime type (Kelly 2010; McMillan 2018; Saunders 2012). Whilst it is difficult to ascertain genuine rates of false allegations, of 5651 prosecutions of rape in E&W, only 35 were formally deemed by police as false (0.6%) (CPS 2017) and experts typically agree that somewhere between 1% and 6% of rape allegations made within the UK are likely to be false (Lisak et al. 2010; McMillan 2018). In recognizing variability in police and socio-legal research scholar perceptions surrounding rates of false allegations, it is important to draw attention to the lack of a standardized definition of what constitutes a false allegation. Police statistics typically reflect “no-crime” cases where a false allegation has not been explained, the victim does not fully cooperate or there is not sufficient evidence to progress the case further (Gregory and Lees 1996; Lisak et al. 2010; Saunders 2012). Therefore, a labelled false allegation is not simply an allegation that is false, but an allegation that contains falsehoods and inconsistencies (Saunders 2012).

#### 4.4. “It’s Not Possible for a Married Woman to Be Raped by Her Husband”

There remains a reluctance among some cultures, religious groups, and sections of society to recognize that rape can occur between marital partners. While this specific myth is less prevalent and pervasive than other IPR myths discussed, at least in a Western context (Byrne et al. 2021; Thelan and Meadows 2021), research has shown that some individuals and communities remain likely to endorse this belief (Basile 1999; Monson et al. 1996, 2000; Lilley 2021). Whatley (2005) found that individuals who hold more traditional views of marriage and endorse stereotyped gender roles for women, were more likely to excuse a married perpetrator’s sexual assault and attribute greater responsibility to the female victim. Interestingly, Monson et al. (1996) observed male respondents’ hesitance when labelling an instance of marital sexual assault as a rape offence that requires criminal prosecution. Notably, most participants asserted that it was *not* possible for a man to rape his wife because they were married. Rape law reform in E&W during the 1990s saw the criminalization of marital rape in legal definitions for the first time and the abolition of the marital rape exemption in 1994 (Westmarland 2004). Whilst this legislation indeed confirms that the assumption that a man cannot legally rape his wife is factually incorrect in an English legal context, many other Western countries, including numerous states within the United States still have widely used provisions built into law which allow men to avoid criminal prosecution for statutory rape of a child, where the victim parents’ consent to a marriage between the child and perpetrator (Ochieng 2020). These rape exemptions are extremely problematic as they appear to vindicate predatory behaviour and excuse offenders’ accountability—the consequence of which is likely to be the enduring nature of such marital rape myths.

#### 4.5. “Men Are Entitled to Exert Their Right to Have Sex within an Intimate Relationship and This Shouldn’t Be Considered Rape”

Another myth pertaining to IPR surrounds a man’s right to sexual intercourse within intimate relationships. Similar to other rape myths that excuse the behaviour of perpetrators of IPR, the sexual entitlement myth serves to promote the idea that men are the dominant stakeholders within intimate relationships to whom female partners should be sexually subservient. Research by Pemberton and Wakeling (2009) found evidence of a strong relationship between attitudes supportive of a man’s ‘right’ to have sex in a relationship and rape myth beliefs among male respondents. Studies indicate that those who endorse strong male sexual entitlement beliefs are more likely to view women and female partners as sexual objects, to whom a man’s sexual desires ought to be complied with (Bergen and Bukovec 2006; Pemberton and Wakeling 2009). Studies indicate that for many men, sex is considered

a birth right, with research displaying those that endorse such beliefs are found to hold rigid and outdated gender stereotypes and exhibit increased scores in hyper-masculinity characteristics (Bouffard 2010; Headd and Willmott Forthcoming; Hill and Fischer 2001). Hill and Fischer (2001) found that not only did hyper-masculinity predict problematic beliefs surrounding sexual entitlement, it also predicted sexually aggressive behavioural endorsement; suggesting the endorsement of this myth diminishes perpetrators perceived responsibility and willingness to engage in sexual aggressive behaviours. Despite the apparent endorsement of this myth among some individuals, typically men who also exhibit problematic gender role stereotypes (Hill and Fischer 2001) and sexist attitudes (Headd and Willmott Forthcoming), IPR is legally defined in E&W as a criminal offence. Regardless of seemingly varied perceptions surrounding their moral obligations, the law is clear in that sexual violence and rape of an intimate partner, justified on the basis of being in a relationship with the victim, is not a viable legal defence. IPR remains a serious violation of women's rights with significant legal ramifications, highlighting the inaccuracy of this IPR myth within an English legal context (Du Mont et al. 2017; House of Commons 1991; Sheilds and Hanneke 1992; Westmarland 2004).

## **5. Intimate Partner Rape Myths: Consequences for Complainants, Criminal Justice Professionals, and Case Outcomes**

### *5.1. Consequences for Complainants*

As discussed above, a wealth of research demonstrates that intimate partner rape myths are considerably persistent and prevalent throughout global societies. The endorsement of such myths and misconceptions, therefore, has significant consequences for rape victims and complainants. IPR myths that diminish the severity of partner rape and undermine the veracity of allegations serve to create barriers between victims, society, and the criminal justice system (Eckstein 2011; Zink et al. 2003). A commonly cited consequence of socially embedded rape mythology upon IPR victims, is the sense of fear and stigmatization associated with making a formal complaint (Hohl and Stanko 2015; Lacey et al. 2011). Fear of not being believed and that the police may not take a formal report seriously, are frequently cited as a key contributor to low reporting rates (O'Neal et al. 2015; Stewart et al. Forthcoming). Indeed, some evidence suggests that victims of rape may themselves endorse the sorts of rape myths discussed above—perhaps unsurprisingly given the prevalence of such myths throughout Western societies. Victims' belief in these misconceptions likely impacts their decisions to report wrongly assuming that their experience may not amount to rape as well as making assumptions about the types of rape offences that police and prosecutors are likely to progress. Moreover, evidence suggests that “real rape” stereotypes, that emphasize the use of force by an unknown perpetrator, often prevent women from labelling their experiences as rape (Edin and Nilsson 2013; Flood and Pease 2009). In fact, many IPR victim-survivors view forced sex as an obligatory part of a marriage or relationship, describing sexual compliance to unwanted sex as a means by which they could prevent other types of physical violence (Eckstein 2011; Kirkman et al. 2021; Zink et al. 2003). Though, perhaps the most notable consequence of persistently held IPR myths are the damaging impacts upon victims and survivors' ability to exit sexually violent relationships, where indeed this may be possible. Research indicates that other people's negative perceptions of IPR victims who endorse the myths highlighted above, particularly those within their immediate network of support (e.g., parents, friends, family), determine how victims perceive their abusive situation and ultimately decisions to seek external support (Baly 2010; Herman 2019; Shorey et al. 2013). Victim-survivors often remain in dangerous relationships and even where they are able to seek external support, do not, to avoid feelings of shame and guilt associated with intimate partner abuse (Eckstein 2011). Rape myths that endorse rigid, traditional gender roles exasperate individuals' inability to leave relationships as victims are labelled as “homewreckers” that fail to embody feminine ideals (Baly 2010; Zink et al. 2003). The endorsement of “real rape” stereotypes and societies ignorance regarding the prevalence

and severity of IPR leave many victims trapped within sexually violent relationships for the reasons discussed.

### 5.2. Consequences for the Criminal Justice System

As is likely expected from the persistent and pervasive nature of rape myths, the existence of rape-supportive attitudes is detrimental to the fairness of the criminal justice system and impartiality mantra preached in the context of trial juries. A wealth of existing research indicates that justice professionals, police practitioners, and legal decision makers endorse problematic misconceptions pertaining to intimate partner violence (Hester and Lilley 2017; Maddox et al. 2011; Nielsen et al. 2018). The possible consequences of these myths are therefore important to consider.

#### 5.2.1. Police and Prosecutors

Police officers, described as holding significant “gate-keeping roles” within the criminal justice system, have been shown to rely on stereotypes, myths, and normative sexual scripts when making investigative decisions within rape cases. Research by Hine and Murphy (2019) and Murphy and Hine (2019) demonstrates that case trajectories and victims perceived credibility, responsibility, and allegation authenticity is significantly influenced by rape myths. Specifically, older male police officers were shown to be more likely to endorse myths pertaining to rigid sex roles and expectations; for instance, that men cannot rape their partners and men have a biological necessity to sexually express themselves (Murphy and Hine 2019). The endorsement of rape myths is likely to bleed into investigative decision making from the point of an allegation being made possibly preventing IPR cases which do not adhere to clear cut “real rape” stereotypes from progressing, as police practitioners and prosecutors may interpret such case types as merely the result of trivial miscommunications (McMillan 2018; O’Neal et al. 2015). Research indicates that stereotypical “real rape” cases are more likely to be taken seriously and progressed from the point of reporting (Frazier and Haney 1996; Spohn and Tellis 2019). Some research indeed implies that police and prosecutors employ downward orientation to predict how jurors will perceive ambiguous case information as a method of selecting which cases are likely to progress (Brown et al. 2007; Hester and Lilley 2017). What is clear from the wealth of recent research exploring police and prosecutorial decision making following a rape allegation and studies exploring rape myth endorsement among such groups, is that explicit and implicit rape myth biases do have a detrimental impact upon rape case progression through the CJS. In E&W, positive developments have seen the emergence of a joint state and academic collaboration known as Operation Soteria-Bluestone. This Home Office-funded program is designed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences (often abbreviated to RASSO) in E&W and identify areas of current strength and weakness (for more information see Davies et al. 2022).

#### 5.2.2. Trial Lawyers and Jurors

A wealth of research demonstrates how rape mythology can also impact upon juror judgements and decision making within rape trials. Court observation research and analysis of rape trial transcripts suggests defence lawyers habitually exploit rape myths in an attempt to influence juror perceptions of rape complainant’s credibility by relating specific case and complainant conduct to general “real rape” stereotypes (Burgin 2019; Burgin and Flynn 2019; Durham et al. 2016; Smith and Skinner 2017; Temkin et al. 2018). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, the influence of rape myth beliefs upon juror judgements, decision making, and deliberative discussions have been well-documented in prior studies. Specifically, experimental studies have displayed jurors who exhibit higher scores on varying rape myth acceptance questionnaires are significantly more likely to return not-guilty verdicts than those who score low on such attitudinal measures (Dinos et al. 2015; Eyssel and Bohner 2011; Hammond et al. 2011; Headd and Willmott Forthcoming; Klement et al. 2019; Lilley et al. Forthcoming; McKimmie et al. 2014; Süssenbach et al. 2013;

Willmott et al. 2018). Such research findings have thereby drawn into question the ability of jurors to fairly and impartially evaluate the evidence presented within rape trials, particularly in respect of IPR cases where attitudes surrounding a man's right to have sex with his partner or wife have historically been widely endorsed. Recent research did find that rape mythology was not widely endorsed among genuine trial jurors (Thomas 2020); however, this study has been widely criticized based on the methodology employed (see Daly et al. 2022). Indeed, most rape trial judges now warn against the endorsement of rape myths within English courtrooms when delivering a direction to jurors (Ellison 2019). Myths they are warned against include many of those discussed within this paper. Interestingly a theoretical concept tested and supported in recent research indicates that rape myth acceptance scores were directly, though differentially, associated with juror belief in complainant and defendant rape trial testimony. Specifically, jurors who endorsed rape myths to a greater extent were found to be more likely to disbelieve the veracity of the complainant's version of events whilst rating the defendant's testimony as more believable, than jurors who scored low in rape myth beliefs. Heightened rape myth acceptance scores were also directly associated with not guilty verdict decisions, both pre- and post-deliberation (Willmott et al. 2018).

Given that a plethora of studies over the past 40 years have found rape myths to negatively impact juror fairness and impartiality (for reviews see Dinou et al. 2015; Hudspith et al. 2021; Leverick 2020; Willmott et al. 2021), it is clear to see why Temkin and Krahe (2008) concluded in their seminal text that rape myths contribute in a major way to trial outcomes.

## 6. Conclusions

Overwhelmingly, rape myths are based on traditional gender stereotypes and patriarchal views of sex that aim to control women's bodies and sexuality. Intimate partner rapes are reflective of passive, inferior sex roles that confine women to abusive partners and sexually violent relationships. As a customary function of rape myths, specific intimate partner myths serve to discredit victims and trivialize the account of rape by downplaying the validity and severity of the assault. The endorsement of such myths has been found to be extremely prevalent among victims, wider societal groups, and legal practitioners within the criminal justice system. Research implies that, like general rape myths, IPR myths are likely to be endorsed by males, older individuals, and those who hold rigid, gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes. A multitude of research indicates that police officers' and prosecutors' belief in such mythology is a significant cause for concern with high levels of rape myth endorsement found and the implications of such upon case progression decisions seemingly demonstrated. This is a major problem considering the fundamental, "gate-keeping" role these individuals hold in rape victims' access to justice. Indeed, studies regularly indicate that the endorsement of rape myths at such an early stage influence case trajectories, victims' perceptions of being believed, and professional perceptions of case authenticity. The implications of which affect both complainants and the fair and impartial persona of the legal system.

Perhaps the most noted consequence of IPR myths is the hindrance placed upon women's ability to exit sexually violent relationships where they may otherwise be able to do so. Here, research indicates 'outside voices' negative perceptions of rape victims, determine the victim's own response. Rape myths appear to trap women within sexually violent relationships by enforcing rigid, traditional gender roles that ostracize victims as failures to embody feminine ideals. Furthermore, rape myths that undermine the veracity of IPR allegations and "real rape" stereotypes can prevent women from labelling their own experiences as rape. Many view forced sex as an obligatory part of marriage and therefore do not recognize the severity of partner rape or lead to their decisions not to report the abuse. In addition to this, rape myth acceptance has demonstrated problematic consequences upon juror decision making and ultimately, verdict decisions; suggesting problems with jurors' ability to impartially evaluate evidence. Given that a wealth of

research shows that individuals high in rape myth acceptance are more likely to return not-guilty verdicts, rape cases (especially non-stranger, ambiguous cases such as IPR's), suffer greater attrition rates compared to any other type of criminal offences. Yet, as a recent body of research suggests that education regarding rape myths and false stereotypes may serve to reduce the detrimental effects often reported (see [Hudspith et al. 2021](#)), this should undoubtedly be the priority among future research and evidence-led policy making. Moreover, wider availability of RMA debunking information and more substantial education for police officers and prosecutors may reduce their reliance upon such belief systems when make case progression decisions. Likewise, the promotion and highlighting of the possible impact of rape myths upon victims of IPR and sexual assault may help enable individuals to label their experiences as rape and seek external help. Finally, the incorporation of juror education within the criminal justice systems that involve pre-trial or in-trial juror training pertaining to the prevalence and influence of rape myths may also be beneficial for reducing jurors' reliance on such myths when reaching trial outcomes (see [Hudspith et al. 2021](#)). Indeed, the use of innovative and engaging technologies has led to improved prosocial outcomes (attitudes, cognitions, victim empathy) when addressing other gender-based violence supportive attitudes (see [Boduszek et al. 2019b](#)) and ought to be considered in the context of rape myth interventions. Ultimately, the reduction of rape mythology throughout the criminal justice process can only serve to elicit fairer and less biased outcomes for the victims and survivors who experience such sexual violence—and this should undoubtedly be the priority for us all.

**Author Contributions:** Writing—original draft, C.L., D.W., D.M. and D.L. Contribution reflected by order of authorship. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This manuscript received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** No ethical approval required for this article.

**Informed Consent Statement:** No participants were recruited in this article.

**Data Availability Statement:** No data was collected for this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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