A Qualitative Study on University Students' Perceptions Regarding Sexual Violence Perpetrated by Women Against Men

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Abstract

Introduction Sexual violence (SV) perpetrated by women against men is socially dismissed and underrepresented in research. The aim of the current study was to explore the perspectives of university students (women and men) on women-perpetrated SV against men.

Methods A total of 19 undergraduate students were presented with a vignette describing a hypothetical situation of SV and interviewed.

Results A thematic analysis was performed, identifying four main themes: characters' *Features*, sexual initiation *Strategies*, *Consequences*, and *Motivations and Contexts*. Participants endorsed gender stereotypes and victim-blaming narratives, but also challenged gender stereotypes and rape myths. Participants could identify violent sexual initiation strategies, could anticipate potential consequences of the abuse, and were able to imagine potential motivational and contextual factors that facilitated the abuse.

Conclusions These results highlight the importance of providing adequate information regarding women-perpetrated SV and can inform preventative approaches targeting social norms that perpetuate the invisibility of this phenomenon. Recommendations for future research are discussed.

Policy Implications Public policies that facilitate the training of professionals who contact with victims may help overcome the influence of rape myths that hinder appropriate intervention. Similarly, policies that support the prevention of SV in university contexts may contribute to translate the results from research into practice.

Keywords Rape myths · Sexual violence · Social scripts · Thematic analysis · University students

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Introduction

Background

Sexual violence (SV) perpetrated by women against men is poorly investigated and often dismissed in the political and societal scene (Brayford, 2012; Carvalho & Brazão, 2021; Turchik et al., 2016). SV is defined as any sexual activity committed against someone who is unwilling or unable to consent (Bagwell-Gray et al., 2015; Basile et al., 2014; Carvalho & Brazão, 2021). This includes sexual acts, attempts to obtain sexual acts, unwanted sexual comments or advances against a person's sexuality using coercion (Jewkes et al., 2002). Coercive strategies may be hands-on (e.g., physical force) or hands-off (e.g., verbal pressure or blackmailing) (Carvalho & Brazão, 2021; Carvalho & Sá, 2017; Johansson-Love & Fremouw, 2006).

Social Scripts and Women Perpetrated SV

The literature on this topic often uses the term female and male when referring to the perpetration of violence and the myths that support it. In this work, we have chosen to use the terms "women" and "man" as we wish to highlight the social nature of these assertions and disengage from notions of biological essentialism, even though these were not those used in most previous research.

SV perpetrated by women against men is often under-represented in the official statistics and in the scientific literature, partially due to prescribed social scripts and the endorsement of stereotyped gender roles (Comartin et al., 2021; Fisher & Pina, 2013; Turchik et al., 2016). Social scripts are prescriptive cognitive structures which ascribe traditional gender roles according to an individual's sex (Byers, 1996). Within these social scripts, rape myths (false beliefs about SV) are particularly relevant for this research, as they implicate the invisibility of offending by women and of victimization by men (Bohner et al., 2009; Carroll et al., 2019; Denov, 2003; Hayes & Carpenter, 2013). One of these rape myths has been described as the myth of women's innocence, which concerns the invisibility of offending by women (Denov, 2003). This myth can in part be explained by the same gender stereotypes that associate women with passive, non-aggressive, caring, and nurturing roles (Christensen, 2018; Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Geppert, 2022; Loxton & Groves, 2022). In turn, this narrative would be incompatible with aggressive, violent, and criminal behavior. Similarly, men rape myths assume that men cannot be forced to have sex against their will, that they are always willing to have sex, and are able to defend themselves if confronted with SV (Carvalho & Brazão, 2021; Chapleau et al., 2008; Turchik & Edwards, 2012; Walfield, 2018). Additionally, these myths assume that only gay men are victims and/or perpetrators of men's rape, that men are not impacted by rape, that men's rape only happens in prisons, and that women cannot rape men (Lowe & Rogers, 2017; Turchik & Edwards, 2012; Walfield, 2018). Thus, being a victim seems incompatible with stereotypes about men, which obliterates men's experiences of SV (Depraetere et al., 2020; Javaid, 2017, 2018; Loxton & Groves, 2022).

In addition, when men use coercive strategies (e.g., verbal pressure) to obtain sex, they are seen as aggressive, while women using the same strategies are seen as promiscuous (Oswald & Russell, 2006). Several studies have shown that women sex offenders are described more positively than men sex offenders, because their behavior is considered more acceptable, less dangerous, and interpreted as affective or romantic (Cain & Anderson, 2016; Carroll et al., 2019; Moore & Miller-Perrin, 2022;

Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1993). Consequently, in a scenario where women are seen as non-aggressive and men believed to have total control over sexual interactions, men are unlikely seen as victims and more often blamed for the acts they have suffered (Bohner et al., 2009; Catton & Dorahy, 2022; Loxton & Groves, 2022; Sleath & Bull, 2009).

The fact that earlier conceptualizations of sexual aggression assumed men as perpetrators and women as victims, such as the ones held in the early version of the widely used Sexual Experiences Survey (Koss & Oros, 1982), or by the FBI until 1992 (Larimer et al., 1999), created serious obstacles to the estimation of the prevalence of women-perpetrated SV against men (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1994). The only victimization of men that was considered was the one perpetrated by other men (Busby & Compton, 1997). The interviews of Sarrel and Masters (1982) of 11 men who were sexually molested by women pioneered the research in this field by recognizing that men could also be coerced into sex by means of non-consented sexual stimulation, eliciting fear and anger, which resulted in traumatic responses.

Prevalence Rates

Research focusing on women-perpetrated SV is scarce, but findings concerning both community and criminal samples indicate that women use sexually violent behaviors in their intimate relationships with men, particularly hands-off strategies, such as verbal coercion, psychological manipulation, and blackmailing (Bates & Weare, 2020; Carvalho & Brazão, 2021; Carvalho & Nobre, 2015; Carvalho et al., 2018). These relate, respectively, to pressuring someone with verbal arguments, questioning someone's sexuality, or threatening to use a position of power (Anderson, 1996). Despite this, men and women seem to use the same hands-on and hands-off coercive strategies (Carvalho et al., 2018; Weare, 2018), and to act similarly in terms of variety and frequency of these strategies, even if their use is prompt by different motivators (Schatzel-Murphy et al., 2009).

A review from Williams et al. (2008), which examined women-perpetrated intimate partner violence in university settings, found prevalence rates for women-perpetrated SV ranging from 1.2 to 46.2% in eight studies. A cross-sectional online survey of 260 women studying in college reported a prevalence of 35.8% of some form of sexual aggression against men (46.2% committed sexual coercion; 34.1% committed sexual abuse and 19.8% used physical violence) (Carvalho & Nobre, 2015). Similarly, in a sample of men seeking help for intimate partner violence, 48.6% reported being victims of women-perpetrated SV, among which 28% were victims of severe SV (involving the use of threats or physical force to have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse; (Hines & Douglas, 2016).

Finally, in a meta-analysis including data from 12 countries, women-perpetrated sex crimes accounted for 12% of the ones captured by victimization surveys and 2% of those reported in official statistics (Cortoni et al., 2016).

Relevance of the Research Topic

The literature highlights the real consequences for adult men who suffer SV from women, including guilt, anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, somatization, sleep disturbances, trauma, or even suicide (Jewkes et al., 2002; Lowe & Rogers, 2017; Peterson et al., 2011). Additionally, the impact of the stigma of being victimized by a women can exacerbate the trauma of the abuse, creating obstacles to help-seeking (Gambardella et al., 2020; Lowe & Rogers, 2017). Some male victims report fear of not being believed and being considered homosexual (Hlavka, 2016; Lowe & Rogers, 2017; Widanaralalage et al., 2022; Young et al., 2018).

In sum, social scripts, rape myths, and gender stereotypes seem to be contributing to the maintenance and invisibility of the sexual victimization of men by women (Carroll et al., 2019; Carvalho & Brazão, 2021; Fisher & Pina, 2013). Describing how individuals, and particularly university students, perceive the phenomenon of SV perpetrated by women against men seems paramount to initiate the process of challenging these social mechanisms. Thus, previous studies have examined these perceptions in groups such as university students (Catton & Dorahy, 2022; Mackelprang & Becker, 2015; Moore & Miller-Perrin, 2022).

Current Study

The current study gathers the perspectives of university students (women and men) on women-perpetrated SV against men. University students were interviewed after reading a description of a hypothetical situation of SV. The interviews conducted aimed to answer the following research question: How do university students perceive SV perpetrated by women against men?

Method

Participants

There were two waves of interviews, conducted by two researchers in 2020 and 2021—first to 9 young women, and then to 10 young men. In total, 19 interviews were collected and analyzed. Overall, interviewees had an average age of 21 years. All of them were undergraduate students at the host institution where the study was conducted. After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and pseudonymized, in order to protect the privacy and identity of the research participants.

Procedures

The study was approved by the Ethics Committe of the School of Psychology and Life Sciences at Lusófona University. All participants were a priori informed of the topic and sensitive nature of the research, and that they could withdraw at any moment. The results presented below are based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, b, 2022). This methodological approach is anchored in a reflexive constructionist background, which seeks to understand and problematize the way respondents make sense of the world around them, rather than seeking to objectively describe phenomena "as they are." Because of this, and considering the topic, special attention was paid to the interviewing process when it comes to making the participants feel criticized or afraid to express their positions and worldviews, regardless of how they might conflict, or not, with the extant literature on the topic. The interviews were not intended to ascertain whether participants had factually correct information about the topic, but how they made sense of it.

The methodological design for this study involved the creation of a short vignette as in Fig. 1 which portrayed a fictitious situation where a woman is on a date with a man, at his place, and resorts to both physical and psychological strategies to pressure him into having sex. The storyline was based on real perpetration episodes of women against men described by Sarrel and Masters (1982) and on other vignettes used in previous research (Moore & Miller-Perrin, 2022). The specific violent strategies included groping, pressuring, insulting, and threatening of posting on Facebook that the victim could not get and erection if he did not take off his pants, and were based on the items of the Sexually Aggressive Behaviors Scale (Anderson, 1996; Rosa et al., 2022). The vignette in this study was co-created by two of the authors ([blinded] and [blinded]), and informally discussed with a group of postgraduate students to ascertain whether the phrasing and language were understandable and context-appropriate for university undergraduate students. The vignette was used in the beginning of a face-to-face interview to spark interest, reflection and debate, and to act as an icebreaker, considering the sensitive nature of the topic at hand. It also allowed the respondents to be able to externalize or project any opinions or thoughts that they might consider to be socially undesirable to express as themselves, or any experiences (direct or indirect) they might have had, onto the characters in the vignette.

The interviewees were of the same gender of the interviewers, to prevent, within reason, any potential discomfort for either the researchers or the interviewees, considering the sensitive nature of the topic being covered

Fig. 1 Translated vignette

Translated vignette

Martha got ready that evening to meet John for the first time because she found him extremely attractive. John was waiting for Martha to watch a movie with her at his place. As they were watching the movie, Martha started getting closer to John, sat on his lap, and started biting his ear. She said she was "really eager to be with him", although he looked a bit uncomfortable. John asked Martha to move away. Martha did not seem to care, as she stayed where she was, and she started grabbing and groping John. He asked her again to stop and explained that he was tired and just felt like watching the movie in peace. John said "Afterwards, who knows, maybe we can do it" and smiled at her. However, Martha continued to provoke him, placing her hand inside his pants. John started getting an erection, although he kept pushing Martha away. After a while, Martha got annoyed, got on top of John, and said: "I want to do it here and now". As John seemed uncomfortable with the situation, Martha got mad and said that João must be a "fagot" to refuse. John replied that he only wanted to finish the movie in peace and that she knew very well we was not a "fagot". Martha replied "yes… but if you don't take off your pants, I will post on Facebook that you could not get an erection and you will regret it!".

by the interviewing process, and attentive interviewing practices were used. Furthermore, as stated above, the participants were duly informed of the topic of the research before the participation. The institution had psychology services available to the participants, and this information was provided to the participants before and after their participation in the study. No participants disclosed any discomfort during or after the interviews, and no participants disclosed any previous experience of perpetrating or having been victim of sexual violence.

Participants provided written informed consent for participation in the study and publication of the results before the interviews. All interviews were conducted in European Portuguese.

Data Analysis

Computer-assisted qualitative analysis was conducted through the deployment of NVivo 12 PRO. The procedure was followed as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2021c).This meant that interviews were first read to identify the main elements and characteristics that would stand out the most, and then a tentative coding scheme was formed from it.

The research team collaborated on the creation and discussion of the coding scheme. As per the steps described by Braun and Clarke (2021c), the interviews were read repeatedly for the researchers to become familiar with the data, and initial codes were generated, which represent basic units of meaning within the dataset, privileging explicit—or semantic—content and meaning, rather than implicit meaning. Each response was taken, in toto, as a unit of coding analysis, to better preserve the complexity and connectedness of those responses, especially considering that data collection was done through semi-structured interviewing.

An almost-final version was then tested for coding consistency using NVivo, and any issues identified were then clarified and discussed among the team. After that, the coding scheme was re-discussed to optimize it, by joining together thematically similar codes until there was no overlap between similar codes. The final coding scheme was thus the product of the authors' iterative process. The discussion of the scheme was only complete when there was full agreement among the whole team about the themes, sub-themes and codes, their definitions, and what interview excerpts belonged (or not) to each code. As is typical with thematic analysis, the same excerpt could be coded in different codes simultaneously, as the same sentence can allude and refer to several ideas at the same time.

Results

This thematic analysis identified four main themes: *Descriptions of Woman Aggressor and Man receiving Abuse, Identification of Sexual Violence Strategies used by Woman Aggressor, Gendered Consequences of Sexual Violence Perpetrated by a Woman, and Motivations and Contexts for Woman Perpetrating Sexual Violence*. The first theme (characters' *Descriptions*) included two sub-themes focused either on the Woman Aggressor (Martha) or on the Man receiving the abuse (John) described in the vignette presented. The theme *Strategies* was divided into two subthemes (physical and psychological) while the theme *Motivations and Contexts* was divided into three sub-themes (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural). The *Consequences* theme was divided into the sub-themes Man receiving abuse and Woman Aggressor and included perceptions about the characters from the vignette but also about abstracted "men" and "women" in
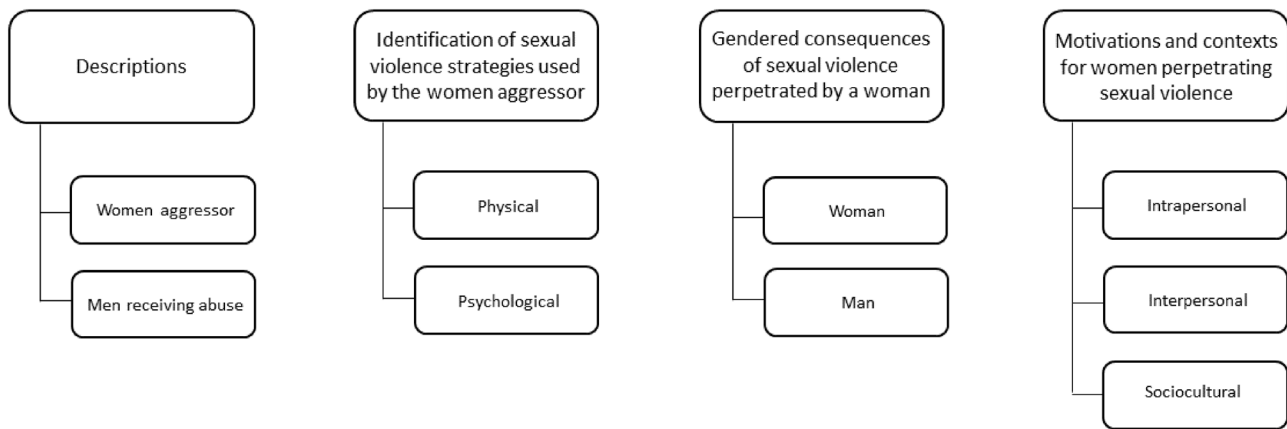
Fig. 2 Graphic representation of themes and subthemes

similar situations. Within each of the subthemes, we classified several codes. See Fig. 2 for a graphic representation of themes and subthemes.

Further down in Table 1, a description and *verbatim* examples of all codes are presented. We have not included frequencies per Braun and Clarke's (2021c) recommendations, since these might be misinterpreted as proxies for the relevance or salience of the data presented—our objective here is to understand the breadth of ways in which participants make sense of the vignette and, by extension, the topic of woman-on-man sexual violence; we make no claim to statistical generalizability, but we do note on the salience and relevance of particular aspects of our data. The examples included correspond to translated extracts of our participants' contributions in Portuguese. The translation was performed by L.O.

Descriptions of Woman Aggressor and Man Receiving Abuse

Participants tended to describe the Woman Aggressor in a mostly negative light, while describing the Man receiving abuse in a mostly positive light.

Both characters were seen as *defying gender stereotypes*. In the transcript below, the participant voiced the expectation that girls in a situation where they felt their partner was uncomfortable with engaging in sexual acts would give up on it, while boys in similar situations would pressure girls into it, a scenario opposed to the one described in the vignette:

> I believe that there are many girls who, in situations like this, try to have something with boys, of course they do, but then they realize that they are not comfortable and will not force the situation. In the part of forcing the situation, I believe it is more frequently

done by boys (…) No, I just found it curious because it is usually the opposite situation, but I think that maybe the girls in this interview might be the opposite situation. (LV, man)

Woman Aggressor

The depictions of the Woman Aggressor were mostly negative (*childish*, *hostile*, *impulsive*, and *manipulative*), as expressed in the participants lingo describing her as "childish," "immature," or in BC's perspective, a man, "she is a bad person, so if she threatens John for not doing something he doesn't want to do, I think, okay, she is bad" (*hostile*). Participants also described Martha as *homophobic*, as seen in this example: "The fact that she started calling him a faggot… that language means she is being homophobic, isn't it? (ND, woman)".

The woman was frequently described as being *seductive*, which entailed constructions from our participants that were somewhat neutral ("she was a more extroverted person (…) Maybe even sassy, not in a bad way…") (DI, man), and others more negative and emotionally charged, as seen in the way some participants slut-shamed Martha ("she is a big slut") (PF, woman).

Man Receiving Abuse

As for the depictions of the Man receiving abuse, these are mostly positive (*assertive, normal,* and *thoughtful*), present in the participants discourse in expressions such as "a normal person," "concerned," "a good person."

Opinions regarding the man's self-expression were split, as some believed his posture was *assertive* despite the woman's sexual initiation strategies, and others believed he was *introvert*

Table 1 Matrix of themes, subthemes, and codes

Main themes	Subthemes	Codes	Description	Verbatim Examples
Descriptions				
	Woman aggressor			
		Childish	Perceived as immature or childlike	She's a bit of a child, ah… She's not mature
		Defies stereotypes	Perceived as defying gender stereotypes	It's usually the reverse situation
		Homophobic	Perceived as disliking or having prejudice against homosexuals	This language is already being homophobic, is it not?
		Hostile and impulsive	Perceived as aggressive or impulsive, i.e., someone that acts without further thinking consequences	She is a bit more lax (…). Okay, she's a bad person
		Manipulative	Perceived as exercising unscrupulous control or influence over a person or situation	Meticulous and capable of… doing something… anything, even going over other people ah… humiliating other people… putting psychological pressure or blackmail, to get what she wants
		Seductive	Perceived as someone bold and enticing or as a "slut."	She is more extroverted, she is less shy; a bit slutty, rash
	Man receiving abuse			
		Assertive	Perceived as having a confident personality or that expressing himself affirmatively	He starts to be more secure
		Defies stereotypes	Perceived as defying gender stereotypes	I think it's unusual [that men have this posture]
		Introvert and submissive	Perceived as shy or reserved, and as compliant or subservient to others/non-assertive	He's having a bit of a passive attitude
		Normal	Perceived as someone normal or adequate	Seemed like a normal person to me
		Thoughtful	Perceived as caring and considerate to others, a "good person"	Being a sincere guy (…) a good person, in general
Identification of sexual violence strategies used by the women aggressor				
	Physical			
		Genital stimulation	The woman stimulates the recipient's genitals without his consent or will	Marta goes so far as to take João's pants in her hands, that is, there is already a sexual touch and an attempt to initiate a sexual act
		Non-genital unwanted touching	The woman touches or gropes the recipient without his consent or will	Is also criticized for having grabbed and groped even after he said he didn't want to and was uncomfortable
		Physical coercion	The woman uses physical force so that the recipient acts involuntarily	Acting violently and the other person wants to stop, and it doesn't stop
		Using an unconscious person	The woman takes advantage of an unconscious or intoxicated person	When they get extremely drunk people or, on any type of substance and, oops, the person goes, doesn't say no, doesn't oppose yes, but is not completely aware
	Psychological			
		Blackmailing	The woman threats to publicly reveal something compromising about the recipient	A story of blackmail
		Harassment	The woman pressures the recipient to go beyond his limits	The psychological pressure she put on him

Table 1 (continued)

Main themes	Subthemes	Codes	Description	Verbatim Examples
		Humiliation	The woman degrades or humiliates the man	The fact that she insulted him and said that she put it on Facebook, I don't think anything justifies that
Gendered consequences of sexual violence perpetrated by a woman				
	Man			
		Anger	The man will become angry	I think João got upset with Marta, and probably kicked her out
		Devaluation	The impact the woman's strategies will be devalued	[He] wouldn't mind that much if she shared it on Facebook. Despite being a defamation and being wrong
		Discomfort	The man feels uncomfortable	João is not comfortable with a situation and says peremptorily that he does not want to proceed with the act
		Give in to sex	The man will give in to the pressure and have unwanted sex	This passivity can lead to hum... To accept it and actually do it
		Inconsequential	The woman's strategies will have no impact	I don't know if the friends believed it because, for a person that's on the internet... You can see that they're upset, angry
		Social stigma	The abuse will negatively affect the man's further experiences	João would feel very bad and insecure, mocked, everything else
		Social support	The man will be supported by his network and community	If João had good friends, obviously they would defend him
		Victim blaming	The man's attitudes contributed to what happened to him	He could have explained better why I didn't want to, so she wouldn't feel so bad. Knowing that girls are very insecure
	Woman			
		Impunity	The woman does not suffer consequences or does not anticipate suffering consequences	If it was a man, on the contrary, it would be the end of the world and maybe with a woman nobody cares, you know?
		Negative public image	The woman may face losses in terms of her public image	Posting intimate things about other people online is never seen well, I think (...) First she would be frowned upon by his friends, and then by her own friends
		Official charges	The woman may risk a criminal charge against her	It's a crime and it must be punishable
		Distress	The woman might experience negative feelings and social repercussions	Marta would be upset about this situation and the rest would depend on the people around her
		Social support	The woman will be supported by her network and community	Of course, there were going to be people who believed in João, others in Marta
		Retaliation	The woman suffers violence	Another possibility was for João to go into violence with her
Motivations and contexts for women perpetrating sexual violence				
	Intrapersonal			
		Coping with rejection	The woman tried to cope with negative feelings stemming from being rejected	[She felt] initially sexual desire ah... After that frustration with the response. Didn't know how to react well
		Homophobia	The woman has homophobic views of men	Could also question his sexuality, as she did

Table 1 (continued)

Main themes	Subthemes	Codes	Description	Verbatim Examples
		Personality	The woman's behavior is a consequence of her personality or individual characteristics	People are people. There are some people who will always end up doing this, I don't know what can change in society for this to end
		Re-enacting past abuse	Either the woman or the man is reenacting past abuse	It may be because of the family environment lived since childhood, having watched a lot
		Sex drive	The woman has a high sex drive at baseline	It might just be a matter of necessity
	Interpersonal	Dominance	The woman wishes to exert power/dominance over the man	She always managed to get what she wanted, so to speak. And he, maybe the fruit of his insecurity, or something, he never wanted to contradict her
		Emotional detachment	The woman does not feel emotionally connected with the recipient	She was determined to have relations with João and by the way she does it, she only seems to show interest in that and nothing more
		Non-coupledom	The characters are not a couple (hence the behavior is justifiable)	It's sexual violence, but as they already knew each other and this could happen between them, hum… I think not in this case, but if they were strangers or if they knew each other poorly, I think in this case, yes
		Revenge	The woman wants to retaliate against the man	Two motives: either out of revenge to embarrass João because João didn't want the same
		Romanticism	The woman is in love or passionate for the man	From what I realized she likes him and, at that moment, wanted to be with him
		Sex drive discrepancy	The woman feels a strong sexual desire for the man (but he does not)	I know of several cases where… In which girls have more sexual desire than men
		Sexual attraction	The woman feels strong sexual attraction for the man	João was extremely attractive, and she wanted to get involved with him
	Sociocultural	Changing times	The situation occurs because societal values are changing	I think they are more and more frequent
		Disinformation	The situation occurs due to poor sexual education	Maybe Marta always grew up getting everything she wanted; There started to be a lot more information
		Facilitating contexts	In which the abuse is more likely to occur due to alcohol/drug use	These types of situations occur in certain environments, at home, or sometimes in a situation in a bar or out at night
		Gender roles	The situation is the result of as in internalized stereotyped gender roles or in "natural" gender tendencies	We try to strive for equality, however we still continue to say that the stronger sex is the man and normally this type of behavior is adopted by the strongest link
		Homophobic assumptions	The situation is a result of toxic masculinity	He's the one who's worthless or not, that's it, who doesn't like women
		Recurrent situation	The situation is frequent or realistic	I believe they are frequent actions
		Sexual objectification	The situation is a consequence of degrading ideas about people's bodies and sexuality	I saw João as a person and not as a sexual object, although I may feel extremely attracted to the boy, he is not a sexual object to favor me

and submissive. As an example, the young man's assertiveness is described in LV's voice (a man):

> …there at some point he starts being more secure and saying, "you know perfectly well I'm not that, I just want to finish watching the movie" and that's it, I want to believe that he was going to keep the same stance, or even, okay, send her away or whatever. (…) I don't believe he would submit to that.

On the other hand, views of John's submission opposed, as in HB's perspective, a young man, John is "… having a little bit of a passive attitude, in my opinion. I don't think he should just say, «Oh, I want to see the movie». I think he should say «Stop! I don't want to! Get off me!» I think you should be a little less passive."

Finally, one participant hypothesized that "John might not be heterosexual. That information is not here, that he desired Martha. But he did get an erection, so it does not make a lot of sense, but ok." (RF, man).

Identification of Sexual Violence Strategies Used by Woman Aggressor

The students described varied coercive tactics used to initiate sexual contact to describe Martha's behavior, but also strategies used in other violent encounters.

Physical Strategies

Physical strategies were coded as *genital stimulation*, *non-genital unwanted touching*, *physical coercion*, and *using an unconscious person* or, in these students' voices, "put her hand down his pants," "gropes and grabs," "forced the act," or "when they catch extremely drunk people." Furthermore, for several participants, the use of physical force or direct physical stimulation was where they drew the line of the abuse. For them, when these strategies were in place, it seemed clearer they were in the presence of a situation of SV. As one of our participants described:

> Ok. I think this could be [sexual violence] … Because of this: because he says no, Martha continues to encourage the situation, John continues to say no, he just wants to see the movie and Martha goes so far as to take John's pants in her hands, that is, there is already a sexual touch and already the attempt to initiate a sexual act. [...] Against John's will. In other words, for me it is, it's already sexual violence. (HB, man)

Psychological Strategies

Psychological strategies mentioned by participants included *blackmailing*, *harassment*, and *humiliation*. Most participants used the word "blackmail" to describe the actions of the woman, others mentioned strategies that were less specific, often named as "psychological pressure," and others specifically focused on how the woman was degrading or pushed the man's boundaries. One participant described:

> It's like that, I think the most objectionable part there is after he says two or three times no, she continues. That's the worst, because there it is, everyone has their desires, and she had desires at first and there's no harm in trying... After a while it starts to be too much, there it is, passes that barrier and it is already too much. For me it's just that and the fact that she wants to put it on Facebook, that he didn't get an erection. I think it's the worst thing about her. (NB, woman)

However, it should be noted that not all participants would describe the situation portrayed as SV, some even employed commonly seen rhetoric blaming the victim for their situation: "I think sexual violence happens when one of the people ends up being forced. Here, John was not forced. Only when she said she was going to post on Facebook" (QA, man).

Gendered Consequences of Sexual Violence Perpetrated by a Woman

When participants discussed consequences of the situation presented in the vignette, they tended to focus on the aftermath of the potential Facebook post. The use of this strategy was described as surprising to many, and often seemed to overrun other aspects of violence. Participants considered the threat regarding the Facebook post the form of violence portrayed in the vignette that would be less likely to occur in the real world.

These consequences were coded under consequences for the *Women Aggressor* and for the *Man receiving abuse*.

Women Aggressor

In this context, individual consequences for the woman included *personal distress or inconvenience* and *official charges*. One participant described this distress like this: "John might look affected by the Facebook post, so she would still not get what she wanted, which would increase her frustration." (ML, woman). Some participants described the possibility of a formal complaint: "His friends (…) would report it to an authority" (MN, woman). Within social consequences, some participants anticipated *impunity* and *social support*, while others anticipated a *negative public image* and *retaliation*. For instance, one participant justified Martha's anticipated impunity as follows: "I think if I saw that on my feed, I would have thought it was a joke, so I would keep scrolling. I think maybe nothing would happen

to Martha, because everyone would have the same reaction as me" (FM, woman). Several participants mentioned that social support would be given to both Martha and John, as exemplified here: "I think his friends would support him and her friends would support her, but his public image would always be affected" (CV, man). Regarding Martha's public image, participants believed this violent incident would have a significant negative impact, as described: "I want to believe that most people would point the finger at Martha (…) and that they would have an attitude of rejection by saying «this is not correct»" (LV, man). One participant mentioned the possibility of retaliation: "Another possibility would be that John would turn to violence against her. I would not rule that out" (JE, man).

Man Receiving Abuse

Anticipated consequences for the man included impact for the self or negative emotions, including *discomfort* and *anger*.

Some participants thought that the man might have an attitude of *devaluation* of the abuse and that this might be *inconsequential* for him, as exemplified here: "If he had a clear conscience, because this does not define his personality, he would not mind that much that she posts about it on Facebook. Although it is a defamation, him and his friends know that it does not define his personality" (ML, woman).

Many participants believed that the man might give in to sex, eventually: "Maybe he really wants it, but now he is focused on the movie and then when the movie finishes… he accepts Martha's pressure and does it in that moment" (JE, man).

Participants anticipated both *social support* and *social stigma*. As an example of a description of social stigma, one participant mentioned: "I think it would destroy John's life a little. With social networks it is easy to expose someone and to be seen by millions of people. Even if it is a rumor, people believe it right away" (IR, man).

As an example of this stigma, some participants employed commonly seen rhetoric blaming the victim for their situation:

> He should have considered the possibility that this could happen… When I bring a girl home, it is likely that it happens. […] I think it is sexual violence, however, they already knew each other, and this could happen between them hum… I think that in this case it isn't, but if they were strangers or if they barely knew each other, it would be [sexual violence]. […] It depends on their relationship. (BC, man)

Finally, one participant mentions several of the aspects referred under this theme:

Probably John, if he used his head, would take Martha to court for having exposed such a situation because it is cyberbullying… Martha would be upset about this situation and the rest would depend on the people around her. If John had good friends, obviously they would defend him. If Martha had good friends, good people, they would say "Are you silly? This can't be done!" or else there would be very bad people who would make fun of John, and he would start to be a victim of bullying, he would be humiliated, and he could kill himself. (PF, woman)

Motivations and Contexts for Woman Perpetrating Sexual Violence

Participants offered different levels of explanations for situations such as John and Martha's, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural explanations.

Intrapersonal

Within Intrapersonal motivations/contexts they focused on individual facets of Martha as *personality,* inner beliefs of *homophobia,* higher *sex drive,* or ways of *coping with rejection.* The following quote summarizes some of these aspects: "Martha might have been a very insecure person and feel like she was not desired by John." (RF, man). Some students reflected that Martha could have been a victim or a witness of SV, and that she may be *re-enacting past abuse,* as exemplified*:* "Maybe someone has done the same to her" (MN, woman).

Interpersonal

Interpersonal explanations included relationship imbalances in power (*dominance*), in *sexual attraction* or concerning a *sex drive discrepancy*. For instance: "John was extremely attractive, and she wanted to be with him because that was her desire. Maybe John did not want to be with her so much. Maybe when he was with her, he did not feel that connection. But Martha desired him a lot, sexually." (RF, man) There seemed to be a split between those who felt Martha's actions were due to her feelings for John of *romanticism* ("Because she apparently fancied him and wanted to be with him," ON, woman), or, contrarily, due to her *emotional detachment* or their *non-coupledom* ("This was a first date and maybe, I don't know, he wasn't as interested in her as she was in him and it ended badly," ED, man). Some students explained her action as acts of *revenge* against his seeming lack of interest in pursuing sex with Martha, as reported here: "Or maybe she did it out of revenge because she could not get what she wanted, so she will try to impose something bad on him,

in this case, sharing these lies with the intent to embarrass him" (DI, man).

Sociocultural

Lastly, sociocultural explanations focused on the overarching context of abuse and the wider social norms, particularly on *gender roles*. As exemplified by this participant, some students approached SV using stereotypes regarding the sexual drive of each gender, among other gender stereotypes: "This situation seems uncommon to me. Men have more sexual and hormonal appetites than women and in this case, she is the one going after him, which is uncommon." (DC, man). The students explained that *disinformation*, or the lack of education on consent and SV could be contributing to the phenomenon:

> "First of all, education at home (…) and then at school. I think at school this is not talked about. Ok, a boy aged 7 or 8 knows it is wrong to touch a girl without her authorization, but that is about it. People are not informed enough." (FM, woman).

Students also reasoned that SV could be a consequence of *sexual objectification*, as mentioned by this participant:

> If I was in Martha's position, I would see John as a person, not as a sexual object, although I might have felt extremely attracted to him. He is not a sexual object that needs to satisfy me. He is a person and has a person, I have to respect him. (FM, woman)

They also added that certain *facilitating contexts* may increase the risk of SV: "I think that these situations often occur in certain environments, at home, or sometimes in a bar or a night out, in which only one person wants it and starts provoking until the other one gives into it" (DO, woman). Many highlighted that the fact that SV is a *recurrent situation*, as exemplified here: "Unfortunately, I think this is a common situation, but in this case, we are seeing the other perspective. Normally, it is a man doing it toa woman, but it is true that it also happens the other way around" (AG, man).

In conclusion, although the situation depicted referred to the violence of a woman toward a man, the discourse often translated the standard narrative, that is, the victimization of women by men. One exception refers to *changing times*, when participants reflected on changes in societal values that might be responsible for a rise of women's initiative. As one participant described:

> In my time when I was younger (…) 6 or 7 years ago it would be... I'm aware that it would be like I'm saying: men either put much more pressure on women and that women had… ah... they felt much more pressured

and manipulated than exactly in this moment now we live in because now women are having relationships at an earlier age and as I said also because of social pressure. It's happening a lot more than it used to because, maybe, before, seeing women with 18 years old virgin was more normal than it is now. Without drawing any conclusion like that, because I can't draw without a statistical basis… But drawing a conclusion like that theoretically I think that now there are more situations as described in the text and there is more and more balance. (IR, man)

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore in depth the perceptions of a group of university students (women and men) regarding SV perpetrated by women against men. This study provided a discussion focused on social scripts concerning SV, namely men's rape myths. This was the first study to evaluate perceptions regarding women-perpetrated SV against men in a community sample in Portugal.

When describing the woman's features, participants attributed her characteristics such as childish, homophobic, hostile, impulsive, manipulative, and seductive, even calling her a "slut," and mentioning that she defies gender stereotypes. Here, participants admitted that they would tend to attribute these characteristics or these behaviors to men and not to women. In fact, several studies have shown that perpetrators of SV tend to be described differently according to their gender, with women usually being described more leniently (Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Mackelprang & Becker, 2015; Oswald & Russell, 2006). Participants were aware of this counter-stereotypical pattern. Similarly, the man was also described as defying stereotypes, with some participants describing his behavior as normal, assertive, and thoughtful, while others described him as introvert, submissive, passive. The same behavior was interpreted by some participants as assertive and by others as submissive. The participants that described the man as passive and submissive expected him to act more proactively and assertively, revealing an attitude of blaming the victim for the violent situation he was in, which has been previously reported (Bohner et al., 2009; Davies & Rogers, 2006; Hlavka, 2016; Kassing & Prieto, 2003; Sleath & Bull, 2009; Sommer et al., 2016). A few participants argued that the man could have acted differently (for instance, being more vocal in his refusal or using humor) while simultaneously declaring that he could not be blamed for what had happened, revealing an ambiguity in their evaluations of this situation. These statements mirror men's rape myths that assume that men cannot be coerced into sex, and that they should be able to act proactively in

order to defend themselves from violence (Catton & Dorahy, 2022; Chapleau et al., 2008; Huitema & Vanwesenbeeck, 2016; Sleath & Bull, 2009; Turchik & Edwards, 2012; Walfield, 2018). Additionally, participants associated the victim's behavior with the possibility that he might not be heterosexual. In the vignette, when the victim refuses the woman's attempt at sexual contact, she uses a homophobic insult to coerce him. Thus, she expresses the men's rape myth that "real men" are always ready to have sexual contact with a woman and that those who are not, must be gay (Davies & Rogers, 2006; Doherty & Anderson, 2004; Loxton & Groves, 2022; Turchik & Edwards, 2012; Walfield, 2018). Some participants agreed with this interpretation, although some did not endorse the violent reaction to the victim's lack of consent. Thus, by acting in a way that defies gender stereotypes, the man was assumed to be gay, and not necessarily a victim. This is a clear example of the definition of men's rape myth and of the impact that these myths can have on silencing the victimization experiences of men, as reported in previous studies (Catton & Dorahy, 2022; Chapleau et al., 2008; Loxton & Groves, 2022; Turchik & Edwards, 2012; Walfield, 2018). A qualitative thematic synthesis described the impact that sexual assault can have on men's perceptions regarding their gender identity and sexual orientation, which highlights the real impact of men's rape myths (Pettyjohn et al., 2022). The participants of the current study expressed other gender stereotypes such as the idea that men have higher libido than women and more difficulty inhibiting sexual impulses. These stereotypes were used in some instances to justify the higher prevalence of SV perpetrated by men against women. This highlights again the influence of social scripts on perceptions regarding what is expected in sexual encounters and how SV takes place (Depraetere et al., 2020; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Loxton & Groves, 2022; McCormick, 2010; Wiederman, 2005). In this case, according to some participants, the man would not fit the stereotype because he would have low libido and/or high impulse control. Nonetheless, some participants expressed awareness of the invisibility of sexual victimization by men, referring the impact of stigma on social perceptions regarding its prevalence. The experiences of stigma in men survivors of SV have been explored in previous qualitative studies (Hlavka, 2016; Widanaralalage et al., 2022).

Most participants identified the different SV strategies used in the vignette. Some participants recognized psychological abuse (including blackmail, harassment, and humiliation) as SV strategies. Some were particularly surprised with the threat regarding the Facebook post, which seemed to be more impactful than other violent strategies. Participants assumed that this strategy would be less frequent than the other ones. These beliefs were anchored on the idea that this online post would be a form of public humiliation that could have adverse consequences for both the victim

and the offender, as people might criticize and sanction the publisher's behavior while mocking and stigmatizing the victim. Violent physical strategies to initiate sexual interactions were also identified, namely genital stimulation, non-genital unwanted touching, physical coercion and using an unconscious person. Some participants only identified the situation as SV when abusive physical touch was involved. This mirrors the stereotype of SV as equivalent to hands-on abusive touch, particularly when the victim is a man, overshadowing other forms of violence (Bates & Weare, 2020; Jenkins et al., 2021). A higher likelihood of labeling abuse as SV when physically abusive touch is involved (as opposed to situations of verbal coercion, for instance) has been reported in previous studies, among various samples (Huitema & Vanwesenbeeck, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2021; Struckman-Johnson et al., 2003). However, not every participant would describe the situation presented as SV. A participant that explicitly verbalized that he would not consider this situation an SV incident justified that based on the relationship between the woman and the man. As they knew each other and there was an expectation regarding that interaction, the participant thought that the behavior of the woman could not be classified as violence. The influence of the relationship between the victim and the offender on the perceptions of seriousness of the abuse as also been described in previous studies (Gravelin et al., 2019; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Sleath & Bull, 2017).

Participants could imagine different consequences of the abuse. When asked whether they thought the man would give in to sex with the woman, most participants thought he would not, as they believed he would be able to deal with the situation. A few participants expressed that the man would be "weak" if he did give in to sex after being abused. Others thought that he might, if he felt attracted to the woman, which could be a possibility, as he showed signs of arousal (an erection). Thus, some participants were not aware that physical arousal can happen in SV situations due to physiological mechanisms that do not reflect the individual's consent (Bullock & Beckson, 2011; McLean, 2013). This has been reported in previous studies, namely with samples of men SV victims (Pettyjohn et al., 2022). In this context, the current data shows that some participants placed the responsibility of the impact of the abuse on the victim, assuming that by having more control over the violent situation, the impact could have been diminished. Again, blaming the victim narratives were at play here, as described in previous studies (Catton & Dorahy, 2022; Kassing & Prieto, 2003; Sleath & Bull, 2009).

Some participants could anticipate adverse consequences of the abuse for the victim on an individual level, including anger and discomfort, and on a social level, namely social stigma. However, others thought that the abuse could have no consequences and that the victim could devaluate its impact.

The underestimation of the impact of SV on men, especially in instances where physical SV did not take place, has been reported previously (Hlavka, 2016; Loxton & Groves, 2022; Moore & Miller-Perrin, 2022). For instance, in a study by Moore and Miller-Perrin (2022), university students thought that the woman victim portrayed in the vignette experienced less feelings of enjoyment and greater feelings of shame, guilt, embarrassment, and trauma compared to the men victim. The anticipated consequences of the abuse for the woman reported by the participants of the current study were a negative public image, official charges, distress, and retaliation from the victim. Some participants were aware of the criminal framing of these behaviors and of the need for social sanctioning of such conduct. It was assumed by participants that the woman's behavior may be answered with impunity, because of her gender. This is a clear reflection of the myth of women's innocence. Indeed, several studies have been raising the issue of a gender gap in sentencing, proposing that a leniency effect toward women might benefit them (Embry & Lyons, 2012; Geppert, 2022; Mackelprang & Becker, 2015; Shields & Cochran, 2020). This is also in line with the results of the study by Moore and Miller-Perrin (2022) in which university students perceived the woman vignette offender as less guilty than the man perpetrator. In sum, the participants of the current study showed an understanding of the possible practical implications of gender stereotypes in this situation.

Participants were also aware that some people might support the victim while others might support the offender. Thus, participants could picture several scenarios, some more in line with the ideal approach of supporting the victim and sanctioning the offender (while offering rehabilitation) while others expected perpetrator's behavior to be devalued and the victim to be stigmatized due to their genders. The impact of stigma and social support (both formal and informal) in the recovery process of victims and survivors of SV has been widely documented (Donne et al., 2017; Hawn et al., 2018; Hirai et al., 2020; Hlavka, 2016; Littleton, 2010; Orchowski et al., 2013; Rapsey et al., 2020; Schönbucher et al., 2014; Wachter et al., 2018). For instance, several men victims have reported being explicitly told by professionals or members of their support network that as men they could not be victims of SV, which exacerbated the negative consequences of the abuse (Pettyjohn et al., 2022).

When discussing potential motivations, students mentioned both intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors that could help explain the occurrence of the abuse. They argued that the woman could have acted the way she did to cope with rejection, due to homophobia, due to her personality, to her sex drive or because she was re-enacting past abuse. The motivations mentioned by participants are mostly in line with the etiology of SV described in the literature, which involves a complex interplay of trauma, mental health and personality difficulties, and particular psychosexual characteristics (such as higher levels of sociosexuality and sexual compulsivity; Carvalho et al., 2018; Christopher et al., 2007; Elliott et al., 2010; Nathan & Ward, 2002; Pereira, 2016; Schatzel-Murphy et al., 2009; Wijkman et al., 2010). In particular, participants mentioned the re-enactment of past abuse, which shows a mature understanding of victimization and offending dynamics, as the literature reports a significant proportion of women sex offenders with histories of childhood abuse (Christopher et al., 2007; Elliott et al., 2010; Levenson et al., 2014; Neofytou, 2022).

Within interpersonal factors, participants mentioned a need for dominance, wanting revenge, emotional detachment, non-coupledom, romanticism, sex drive discrepancy, and sexual attraction. Thus, participants could explain this violent incident with both negatively charged dynamics such as dominance and revenge and with a disruption of expected positive dynamics such as romanticism and sexual attraction (i.e., there was an expectation of a sexual encounter that did not happen). This is in line with results from previous studies where participants attributed sexually violent behavior perpetrated by women to romanticism (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1991). Additionally, the feelings of the woman toward the victim were used to explain the abuse in two opposing ways: some participants thought the perpetrator was violent because she had feelings for the victim and felt rejected, while others thought she could do that because there was no emotional or romantic attachment. Most participants mentioned a feeling of rejection, with some resorting to stereotypes such as the idea that women tend to get all the men they want, so they do not know how to deal with rejection.

Finally, on a sociocultural level, participants identified several facilitating factors including: gender roles, homophobic assumptions, disinformation regarding sexual education, facilitating contexts, sexual objectification, an evolution in societal values, and the fact that this would be a recurrent situation. These findings are in line with reports from previous research which highlight gender roles and homophobia as inescapable sociocultural factors involved in perceptions regarding women-perpetrated SV against men (Davies & Rogers, 2006). Men's gendered experiences with SV were analyzed in a qualitative thematic synthesis which underlined the influence of gender stereotypes in violent strategies used against men, in their processing of victimization experiences, and in their behavioral and help-seeking responses to victimization (Pettyjohn et al., 2022). According to these authors, the social construction of gender and masculinity create a specific risk for the sexual victimization of men associated with the pressure to always be ready to engage in sexual activity. Alongside these, the fear of homophobic stigma seems to be an ever-present threat for men (Pettyjohn et al., 2022; Widanaralalage

et al., 2022). Participants in the current study also pointed out disinformation regarding sexual education as a potential facilitating factor. Indeed, previous literature has advocated for the potential role of sexuality education in the prevention of SV (Santelli et al., 2018; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020). Within facilitating contexts, participants mentioned the influence of alcohol or drugs, in line with previous reports, as these are typically interpreted as facilitating factors (Budd & Bierie, 2018; Pica et al., 2021). Finally, participants were aware of the association between sexual objectification and SV, which has been widely researched (Awasthi, 2017; Gervais & Eagan, 2017; Gervais et al., 2014).

The results of this study highlight the presence of gender stereotypes in the participants' accounts, although some did reflect on the need to challenge these and on an increasing tendency for these to be less endorsed and impactful.

Limitations

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of its limitations. A selection bias and a social desirability effect may have influenced the results of this study. In other words, students who participated in this study may have been more aware of SV and, in particular, of women-perpetrated SV, providing answers which were in line with their expectations of what a desirable answer would be.

This study used a single vignette, which did not allow the exploration of participants' perceptions of SV in other scenarios, namely with different gender combinations. For instance, a vignette where the gender of the perpetrator was not specified but where the gender of the victim was explicitly of a men's, might have induced different responses. Thus, no interpretations can be drawn regarding participants' perceptions of SV in other contexts or offender-victim pairs. Nonetheless, we highlight that the vignette was designed according to reports of women-perpetrated SV against men shared in previous literature; hence, the scenario in the vignette should be realistic enough to elicit reactions comparable to those elicited by actual cases.

Finally, no questions were asked regarding participants' perceptions of their willingness to intervene in similar situations, so practical implications from this qualitative data cannot be drawn. In other words, despite recognizing the situation as violence, it is not known whether participants would act as bystanders in similar situations in order to prevent them or intervene, for instance, calling out the offender or reporting to the police. Future studies are needed to further clarify the link between these perceptions and the willingness to intervene in SV situations.

Recommendations

Previous research has identified differences in the attribution of seriousness of women-perpetrated SV according to several factors, including gender and professional occupation (Fávero et al., 2022; Gakhal & Brown, 2011; Higgins & Ireland, 2009; Kim & Santiago, 2020; Mellor & Deering, 2010; Parratt & Pina, 2017). An interesting avenue for research would be the exploration of the associations between individual factors (e.g., gender, age sexual orientation, and personality) and perceptions regarding women-perpetrated SV, including men's rape myths (Fávero et al., 2022; Mellor & Deering, 2010; Moore & Miller-Perrin, 2022).

This line of research could also be enriched by exploring the intersections between the victim's gender and other situations which may increase their risk of stigmatization, such as belonging to the LGBTQ + community, having addiction or mental health issues, being involved in sex work, having a disability, being an immigrant, migrant or refugee, or being in a situation of homelessness, among others (Donne et al., 2017; Du Mont et al., 2013; Harrison & Parekh, 2022; Heerde & Hemphill, 2015; Kanefsky et al., 2022; Miles et al., 2022; Peterson et al., 2011; Sprankle et al., 2018; Tyler, 2008; Tyler et al., 2004; Wachter et al., 2018). Some participants in this study brought up the sexual orientation of the victim, questioning whether he might not be heterosexual. Thus, sexual orientation seemed to impact the participants' perceptions, which further justifies the exploration of these intersections. Thus, future studies could evaluate whether men victims are further stigmatized when they belong to other minority or vulnerable groups and whether blaming the victim narratives contribute to maintaining that stigmatization.

Policy Implications

This study highlights the impact of social scripts and of men's rape myths in the perceptions of university students regarding women-perpetrated SV against men. Rape myths have been identified in other research samples, including groups of professionals who contact with potential victims daily, such as police officers, health care professionals, and judicial professionals (Dellinger Page, 2010; Fávero et al., 2022; Fehler-Cabral et al., 2011; Kassing & Prieto, 2003; Sleath & Bull, 2017; Strunk, 2017). Challenging rape myths among these groups is imperative to offering appropriate care and intervention. Thus, offering SV specialized training to these groups of professionals may be crucial to avoid the invisibility of victims and the impunity of offenders (Bullock & Beckson, 2011; Davies & Rogers, 2006; Widanaralalage et al., 2022). Thus, future research

could test specialized training interventions for these professional groups. Public policy initiatives are needed to facilitate this specialized training.

Finally, up-to-date evidence-based SV prevention programs targeting university students could be further refined in order to challenge men's rape myths and social scripts regarding women-perpetrated SV (Bohner et al., 2009; Coker et al., 2014; DeGue et al., 2014; Huitema & Vanwesenbeeck, 2016; Jouriles et al., 2018). Having a holistic approach that, while acknowledging the gender imbalance of SV, also raises awareness for victimization of men and offending by women seems paramount for ensuring the prevention of SV against all genders (Hlavka, 2016; Moore & Miller-Perrin, 2022; Turchik et al., 2016). The inclusion of these contents in prevention programs must be tested with rigorous methodologies, ideally in the context of randomized controlled trials. Public policies that foster the application of such prevention programs in university settings, such as the 2013 Campus Sexual Violence Elimination (Campus SaVE) Act applied in the USA, may have an important role in ensuring the translation of this research into practice (Brush & Miller, 2022; Griffin et al., 2017).

Conclusions

This study provides and in-depth exploration of the perceptions of university students regarding women-perpetrated SV, showing that gender stereotypes and rape myths play a significant role in the narratives of participants. Participants endorsed some gender stereotypes and used blaming the victim narratives, while also being able to challenge other gender stereotypes and rape myths. Participants could identify violent sexual initiation strategies, could anticipate potential consequences of the abuse and were able to imagine potential motivational and contextual factors that facilitated the abuse. These results highlight the importance of providing adequate information regarding women-perpetrated SV to challenge the invisibility of offending by women and victimization of men. Qualitative data on the general public's perceptions regarding women-perpetrated SV against men can inform preventative approaches targeting social norms that perpetuate the invisibility of this phenomenon.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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