

The Meaning of Sexual Violence and Society Stigma Against Victims of Sexual Violence

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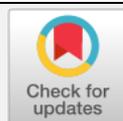
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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence is a serious issue that is becoming more common in various forms. The number of victims of sexual violence is growing, and its forms are becoming more diverse. This study aims to reveal the meaning of sexual violence to victims or survivors and the social sanctions they face. This study employed mixed-method research, with 377 respondents interviewed. According to the findings of this study, victims perceive sexual violence as a bad, embarrassing, and inappropriate experience. The victims were subjected to social sanctions from the community, including friends, neighbors, and social media users. The Law of Sexual Violence Crime Number 12 of 2022 demonstrates the state's efforts to achieve gender justice. This study recommends the need to protect victims of sexual violence from families, communities, society, and the state to realize gender equality.

Keywords: Gender Justice; Gender Equality; Social Sanctions; The Meaning of Sexual Violence; Victims of Sexual Violence

1. Introduction

This study on the model for protecting victims of sexual violence in universities is critical to achieving the 5th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), specifically gender equality (5th SDG). Data shows that the prevalence of sexual violence in college is rising. Various news in the national press also shows an increase in cases. The disclosure of cases of sexual violence in universities demonstrates that the world of education is not positively correlated with the act of not sexually harming others. Universities are places where knowledge is sought, and the next generation is created. Reality demonstrates that college friends and lecturers can commit sexual violence.

Sexual violence is a serious problem in social, work, family, and educational environments. Sexual violence includes a range of behaviors such as rape, sexual coercion, unwanted contact, and unwanted non-contact experiences such as harassment (Dills et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017). Sexual violence is a crime against humanity and threatens world peace and security. Sexual violence is the threat and insecurity that affects women the most (Meger, 2016).

Sexual violence is defined as an attack of a sexual nature, whether or not sexual intercourse occurs, regardless of the victim's relationship with the perpetrator (Indrayana, 2017). Sexual violence is typically perpetrated by a known perpetrator, in a controlled environment, using alcohol, with no weapons, and with such physical strength that victims are easily deceived (Rossetto & Tollison, 2017). Sexual violence against women occurs as a result of women being reduced to men's bodies and sexual objects (Rahma et al., 2020; Susanti & Pebriyenni, 2021; Tuasela & Parihala, 2017). One in every 14 adolescent/school students has been raped due to dating, seduction, or requests for sexual favors (DeGue et al., 2012). The lack of clear regulations aimed at educational institutions to protect students from the threat of sexual violence is one of the causes of sexual violence in the educational environment (Pessoa et al., 2017).

Sexual violence in educational institutions is a historical phenomenon that persists in society. Many students experience sexual violence on campus and are at high risk (de Heer & Jones, 2017). Victims of sexual violence in schools/on campus are mostly women subjected to unwanted sexual contact. Worse, schools/campuses rarely compensate victims of sexual violence (Rosenthal & Freyd, 2018; McMahan et al., 2020). Sexual violence on campus is a humanitarian and health problem; approximately 20% of women and 6% of men experience sexual violence while attending college (McMahan et al., 2020). Victims of sexual violence on campus typically remain silent and do not take action. They only dare to speak up when they have a social urge to do so, and their peers are also victims (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018; Boesten & Henry, 2018; Valls et al., 2016).

Sexual violence in educational settings can have devastating physical and psychological consequences, such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), fear, low self-esteem, and depression, leading to early dropouts (Le Mat, 2016). In conflict studies, sexual violence in the social environment is intended to subjugate opponents without regard for human rights or gender-based crimes (Agerberg & Kreft, 2019). Sexual violence is also driven by a patriarchal culture that limits women's agency (Lokot, 2018; Kreft, 2018; Ademiluka, 2018).

Sexual violence against women is still prevalent, and society is hesitant to address it (Hollander, 2016; Decker et al., 2018; Edwards et al., 2022). The rise of sexual violence in the public sphere is caused by a lack of public recognition of sexual violence as a fatal crime; on the contrary, the public does not appear to react too firmly, allowing sexual violence to persist (McGlynn & Westmarland, 2018). Victims of sexual violence often hesitate to report their abuse to legal aid organizations or the police because they are embarrassed about their social situation, especially if the perpetrator is the victim's closest person. Cases of sexual violence are

frequently ignored because many people consider sexual violence to be a private matter (Hilmi, 2019; Setiyawan & Mahmud, 2018).

Sexual violence severely impacts the victim's mental health, depressive symptoms, and severe PTSD symptoms (Catabay et al., 2019; Khalifeh et al., 2016; Anderson et al., 2016). Sexual violence can have a negative impact on victims' health in the short and long term, both directly and indirectly. Sexual, reproductive, and mental health are all at risk for victims (WHO, 2017).

Although numerous studies on sexual violence have been conducted, this study is unique in that it seeks to sociologically illuminate the meaning of sexual violence from the perspective of victims or survivors and the social sanctions they face. The victims' interpretations of sexual violence must be investigated to ascertain their perspective on how sexual violence should be interpreted. Additionally, sociological research on the social sanctions endured by victims has been sparse. This study aims to examine sexual violence in depth and serves as a reference for future research on the subject.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed mixed-method research. Mixed method research is utilized to obtain in-depth information and data. This study examines the meaning of sexual violence from the perspectives of victims or survivors and the social sanctions they face.

Participants in this study included women and men who attended universities in East Java and had experienced sexual violence. Respondents in this study consisted of 323 women and 54 men. Data obtained by availability sampling. Students who had experienced sexual violence and were willing to be interviewed were eligible to participate in this study. In this study, 0.5% of the respondents were 17 years old, 23.9% were 18 years old, 47.2% were 19, 25.2% were 20, and 3.2% were 21.

The data for this study was gathered in two stages. The first stage, quantitative data collection, was carried out using a questionnaire containing a series of structured questions. The second stage entails gathering qualitative data through in-depth interviews to enrich the data. The data obtained in the study are more detailed, in-depth, and varied with in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with male and female students who had been victims of sexual violence.

Furthermore, quantitative data was processed and presented as frequency tables. Meanwhile, the qualitative data collected was transcribed, classified, and categorized based on the studied research topic. Then, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed, discussed, and dialogued with relevant previous studies.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Meaning of Sexual Violence for Victims

Victims interpret sexual violence in a variety of ways. This study's respondents used various expressions to express their feelings and thoughts. The 377 respondents conveyed different expressions. **Table 1** shows that 17.4% of victims believe sexual violence is wrong. This figure represents the majority of respondents' views. Following that, 12.5% of victims stated that sexual violence is a shameful thing and an act that can occur anywhere and anytime. In addition, 11.1% of victims also stated that sexual violence was detrimental and caused trauma.

Table 1. The Meaning of Sexual Violence for Victims (n = 377)

No.	Respondents' Perspectives on Sexual Violence	F	%
1	Concerning	29	9.5%
2	Worrying	20	6.6%
3	Bad and wrong actions	53	17.4%
4	Terrifying	14	4.6%
5	Harmful and traumatizing	34	11.1%
6	No comment	10	3.3%
7	Coercive action	16	5.2%
8	Confronting	19	6.2%
9	Unusual action	8	2.6%
10	Actions that can happen anywhere and anytime	38	12.5%
11	Very disgusting	17	5.6%
12	Actions that cause psychological disorders	15	4.9%
13	Actions forbidden by religion	25	8.2%
14	Shameful actions	38	12.5%
15	Actions that violate the law and human rights	27	8.9%
16	Destroying generations	14	4.6%
Total		377	100%

Source: Primary Data

According to **Table 1**, victims of sexual violence conclude various meanings about sexual violence. They expressed concern about sexual violence, specifically about themselves and those in their social circle suffering the same fate. Concerned victims tend to withdraw, feel guilty, and find it difficult to reconcile with the situation. This perception is caused by a tumultuous psychological state and a mind that finds it difficult to accept the situation. Furthermore, victims of sexual violence must be particularly worried about themselves. Female sexual violence victims are generally concerned about their future. The fear of not being accepted as a partner when married often becomes a woman's fear.

It is undeniable that victims of sexual violence perceive the meaning of trauma after the violence has occurred. These traumatic thoughts emerge and cast a shadow over the victim. Sexual violence typically occurs not only during sexual activity, such as ordinary penetration, but is also accompanied by threats, terror, and physical violence, rendering the victim helpless. This results in a traumatic situation for the victim. If not handled properly, this trauma condition will be a long-term issue that will be extremely harmful to the victim. The victim will suffer long-term consequences as a result of this trauma.

On the other hand, the victim stated that sexual violence was a form of coercion. When there is no agreement from both parties, the action is considered sexual violence. Sexual violence, both verbal and physical, occurs because sexual violence perpetrators always use force. In the case of rape, the victim is coerced into having sexual intercourse and is rendered

helpless. There are times when the perpetrators of rape use a method of making the victim unconscious.

Sexual activity can be the most repulsive and heinous for victims of sexual violence. This results from traumatic feelings that remain imprinted in the victim's memory. Sexual violence was described as disgusting by 5.6 percent of victims. The victim's interpretation is nothing more than the impact of the sexual violence they endured. The disgust came from the fact that the sexual activity they engaged in was not of their own volition. Furthermore, anger toward the perpetrator causes feelings of disgust, badness, and filth. Individuals who are sexually harassed have negative attitudes toward sexual relationships.

Victims of sexual violence frequently experience feelings of shame and inferiority. Feelings of regret also haunt the victims due to the perpetrators' aggressive actions, which they could not anticipate. According to [Indrayana \(2017\)](#), sexual violence is defined as an attack of a sexual nature, whether or not sexual intercourse occurs, regardless of the victim's relationship with the perpetrator. The attack by the perpetrator has caused trauma and anger for the victim. However, many victims cannot defend themselves due to various circumstances and are overwhelmed by feeling pressed.

Meanwhile, previous studies have found that sexual violence against women occurs because women are reduced to the body and sexual object of men ([Rahma et al., 2020](#); [Susanti & Pebriyenni, 2021](#); [Tuasela & Parihala, 2017](#)). So far, female victims have been more likely than male victims to speak up. Furthermore, the potential for sexual violence affects women more than men due to power dynamics and patriarchal culture that are deeply ingrained in community groups. Men have strong cultural symbols as masculine figures in certain cultures, while women have strong cultural symbols as feminine figures. This social discourse isolates women, leaving them vulnerable to sexual crimes.

Furthermore, no one can guarantee that any space is free of the potential for sexual violence. Even an exclusive environment, such as an educational institution, cannot be separated from the possibility of violence. [Behrman et al. \(2017\)](#) even state that education is not positively associated with the act of not sexually harming others. Teachers and schoolmates can be sexually assaulted. This demonstrates that there is no haven for anyone who does not want to become a victim of sexual violence.

3.2. Social Sanctions Received by Victims as a Result of Sexual Violence

Experiencing sexual violence is bad for the victim's physical and psychological condition. After experiencing harassment or violence, victims do not only consider their physical and psychological injuries but also how society views victims of sexual violence as unfortunate individuals. Their fear intensifies when they are labeled or stigmatized by the community.

Table 2 shows that several social sanctions are addressed to the victim. 23.9% of victims said they were blamed for their appearance. Generally, these reasons are directed at women. Meanwhile, 17.8% of victims reported being blamed for their way of speaking, 26.8% reported being blasphemed by friends and neighbors, 12.7% reported being bullied on social media, and 33.2% reported being asked to repent.

Table 2. Forms of Social Sanctions (n = 377)

No	Forms of Social Sanctions	Yes		No		Total
		f	%	f	%	
1	Blamed for appearance	90	23.9%	207	76.1%	377/100%
2	Blamed for the way of speaking	67	17.8%	310	82.2%	377/100%
3	Blasphemed by neighbors/friends	101	26.8%	276	73.2%	377/100%
4	Bullied on social media	48	12.7%	329	87.3%	377/100%
5	Told to repent	125	33.2	525	68.8%	377/100%

Source: Primary Data

Table 2 shows that the social sanctions imposed by the community on victims are quite severe and cruel. Living in a less aware community of sexual violence victims makes victims feel more intimidated and cornered. Female victims of sexual violence who are blamed for their appearance feel unfair. The community’s expectation of politeness is not always clear. The cause of women being sexually abused cannot be generalized because of their clothes; schoolchildren who are victims of pedophilia demonstrate that clothing is not the primary cause of sexual harassment and violence.

Bullying, on the other hand, becomes a real social sanction in society. It occurs everywhere, but it is most prevalent in conservative societies. It does not occur only in friendship circles; perpetrators of sexual violence in the form of bullying can also come from families. The case of the death of a victim of sexual violence, Novia Widyasari, demonstrates that she was bullied by her family (Budianto, 2021). Bullying victims of sexual violence makes them mentally ill and leaves them with no hope. The end of the bullying that Novia endured eventually drove her to commit suicide. This confirms that cases of sexual violence are extremely complex issues, not only in terms of sexual activity but also in terms of the long-term impact of the problem.

A study conducted by Espelage & de la Rue (2013) revealed that victims of sexual violence who are still children or teenagers are vulnerable to bullying, particularly from peers at school, through ridicule, intimidation, and sexual comments. Teenagers who are still in school have a difficult time re-integrating into their school environment. Bullying from peers at school exacerbates the mental health of victims of sexual violence. Furthermore, the stigma attached to victims by the community causes them to withdraw and lose trust in others (Yanuar & Pratiwi, 2019; Anastasya & Susilarini, 2021).

The community’s labeling or stigma cannot be separated from the culture of the community that does not support the victim. Such things occur at all levels of society and in rural and urban areas. Even so, victims of sexual violence face stigma in more conservative societies because conservative societies maintain a culture of chastity (Chakraborty et al., 2018). Engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage is considered a major disgrace in certain community groups and thus deserves punishment, one of which is social sanctions. However, this culture is never on the side of the victim. Previous studies have found that the stigma imposed by society is a barrier to preventing violence and assisting victims in surviving (Murray et al., 2015; Verelst et al., 2014a, 2014b).

Meanwhile, when asked which party the victim trusted to share the experience of sexual violence, the victim answered that there were various parties, ranging from friends, family, and non-governmental organizations. **Table 3** shows that 43.2% of victims told their parents about their problems. Parents are considered to protect their children. Meanwhile, 45.4% of the victims chose to inform their friends. While for the remaining percentages, victims report to the

police, relatives, distant family, boyfriends, neighbors, teachers, and non-governmental organizations.

Table 3. Trusted Parties to Share Experiences of Being a Victim of Sexual Violence

No	Trusted Parties to Share Experiences of Being a Victim of Sexual Violence	F	%
1	Parents	163	43.2%
2	Relatives	15	4%
3	Distant Family	7	1.9%
4	Friends	171	45.4%
5	Boyfriends	6	1.6%
6	Neighbors	2	0.5%
7	Teachers	3	0.8%
8	NGO	1	0.3%
9	Police	9	2.4%
Total		377	100%

Source: Primary Data

Victims of sexual violence require assistance from various parties. Survivors of sexual violence require the support of professional services because professional services are more flexible in responding to and assisting victims (Hester & Lilley, 2017). Institutions that protect victims of sexual violence understand how victims feel, so reporting to the agency is necessary. On the other hand, social and economic factors influence healing support for survivors of sexual violence. Sexual violence can lead to stigma from society, health care providers, and families, including intimate partners (Jina & Thomas, 2013; Custers & Bulck, 2013). Victims who do not have access to institutions that protect them find it difficult to receive rehabilitation, particularly in terms of psychology.

Hardjo & Novita (2015) stated that the more social support adolescent victims of sexual violence receive, the better their psychological well-being. Victims who received better treatment showed signs of recovery. A supportive environment should also follow this. Without a good environment, it will be difficult for survivors to heal. Social support will make it easier for victims to make peace with themselves. The absence of social support, on the other hand, will make it difficult for victims to struggle with the trauma of post-sexual violence (Rini, 2020; Novianty et al., 2016; Probosiwi & Bahransyaf, 2015).

In the book Discipline and Punish (Foucault, 1975), Foucault argues that normalization becomes a panopticon carried out in society so that individuals obey the norms. As of now, victims of violence have been disproportionately blamed. The occurrence of sexual violence is considered the victim's fault. The normalization done by the community confirms this. Victims of violence are presumed guilty based on their appearance and manner of speech. They are bullied on social media as well. The blame placed on the victim makes the victim suffer even more. This is constantly normalized in society, reinforcing the victim's role as the perpetrator of sexual violence. Society even asks victims to repent.

Connell, on the other hand, discusses gender ideology through discourse and action (Connell, 1985). Ideology is put into practice through action. Gender relations involve a social action structuring process centered on sex and sexuality. Gender equality will not emerge

naturally; rather, it will require the encouragement of collective actions to be realized. As a result, efforts to protect victims of sexual violence are critical. The enactment of the law on Sexual Violence Crime (UU TPKS) shows the presence of the state in protecting victims of sexual violence. Furthermore, implementing these policies must be monitored to ensure that they truly provide justice for victims of sexual violence, as one of the goals of sustainable development (the fifth SDGs).

4. Conclusion

Sexual violence experienced by victims has various interpretations and meanings. In general, victims of sexual violence perceive it as a bad, worrying, frightening, very disgusting, and traumatizing experience. Some of them cannot tolerate sexual violence because it violates their dignity as a whole person. A small part of the victims remains tolerant because of the violence committed by their boyfriends.

Victims also suffer even more when society imposes social sanctions on them. After experiencing sexual violence, the fear felt by the victim intensifies as the community gives a label or stigma. Victims of sexual violence face the following social sanctions: they are blamed for their appearance, particularly female victims. Victims are also blamed for the way they talk. Many victims of sexual violence are blasphemed by friends and neighbors and bullied on social media. The victim is also asked to repent because the community believes that the sexual violence suffered by the victim is the victim's fault.

The parties trusted by the victim to share experiences of sexual violence include friends, family, and non-governmental organizations. Generally, victims tell their problems to friends because friends are seen as trustworthy and capable of understanding the victim's feelings. Some victims tell their parents about their experiences of sexual violence to seek protection. Meanwhile, many victims inform their relatives, distant family, boyfriends, neighbors, teachers, non-governmental organizations, and the police. Based on the conclusions, family, community, society, and the state must take measures to protect victims of sexual violence.

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