

Breaking the Silence: Addressing Men’s Underrepresentation in Sexual Assault Cases and Policy as a Gender Equality Issue

Samson Oteniya*

1. Executive Summary

Male survivors of sexual assault remain significantly underrepresented in the United Kingdom’s (UK) policy, support, and legal frameworks. This policy report identifies this underrepresentation not merely as a gap in crime reporting but as a critical issue of substantive gender equality. Drawing on Fredman’s theory of substantive equality and Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, this report examines how legal definitions, cultural stigma, and gender norms have systematically silenced male victims, thereby contributing to their underrepresentation in sexual assault cases and policy.

While awareness has grown in recent years, spurred by high-profile cases and survivor advocacy, many men still encounter persistent barriers to speaking out as victims of sexual assault and accessing justice. The reasons for their silence may lie in deeply rooted societal expectations of masculinity, gender-biased legal classifications, inadequately tailored support services, and exclusion from mainstream gender violence policies.

To address this structural inequality, the report recommends three primary reforms:

- I. Awareness and Education
- II. Policy and Legal Reform
- III. Enhanced Support Services

Overcoming these barriers is essential—not only to ensure justice and care for all survivors but as a necessary step toward meaningful gender inclusion.

* Kent Law School, LLB with Honours Graduate, 2025. Email Oteniyasamson1@gmail.com

2. Introduction

Sexual assault is a grievous crime and a violation of fundamental human rights,¹ yet public discourse and policies in the UK traditionally focus predominantly on female victims. This approach has inadvertently rendered male victims largely invisible.

Under UK law, sexual assault refers to intentional sexual touching without consent, while the more serious offence of rape is defined as non-consensual penile penetration.² This report uses 'sexual assault' as the primary term to include a range of non-consensual sexual acts against men. Other terms, such as 'sexual violence' (used in public policy) and 'sexual offences' (used in legal contexts), appear as needed, but unless otherwise stated, all refer to broadly the same category of non-consensual sexual conduct.

'Men's underrepresentation' in this report refers both to lower reporting rates and limited visibility of male survivors in public narratives and support mechanisms. This report argues that neglecting male survivors is not just a gap in policy but a critical gender equality and gender inclusion issue; equitable responses to victimisation are essential for comprehensive gender-based violence strategies.

Recent high-profile cases – such as the conviction of Reynhard Sinaga, who targeted male victims³ – alongside increased media coverage and modest governmental acknowledgment – including a £500,000 UK fund to support male victims of rape and sexual abuse⁴ – highlight growing awareness. Nonetheless, persistent challenges mean men remain isolated, unsure of available support in a society often dismissive of their trauma.

This report provides a UK-focused analysis of the issue. It examines the scope of male underreporting, the underlying causes for men's reluctance to report or seek help, and the current legal and policy context that frames the response to male sexual assault. By reviewing statistics, testimonies, and academic insights, the report illustrates both the scope of the

¹ Muinat Mustapha, 'Rape as Violation of Fundamental Human Rights: A Peculiarity of Developing Nations' (2022) 1 *Redeemer's University Nigeria, Journal of Jurisprudence and International Law* 67.

² Sexual Offences Act 2003, s.1 and s.3.

³ Owen Jones, 'Male rape survivors suffer in silence. We need to help them talk', *The Guardian* (16 January 2020).

⁴ Alan Travis, 'UK launches £500,000 fund to help male victims of rape and sexual abuse', *The Guardian* (13 February 2014).

problem and potential solutions. It underscores that addressing male underrepresentation is vital to achieving genuine gender equality and concludes with actionable recommendations aimed at ensuring comprehensive justice and support for all survivors.

3. Theoretical Framework: Framing Male Underrepresentation as a Gender Equality Issue

This report adopts a gender equality framework grounded in contemporary legal and sociological theory to explain the persistent underrepresentation of male survivors of sexual assault. Rather than treating this issue as a matter of isolated oversight, it is analysed as a reflection of broader systemic inequalities in how gender is constructed, perceived, and operationalised within UK institutions and policy frameworks.

First, the report draws on Fredman’s theory of substantive equality, which extends beyond formal equality and equal treatment.⁵ Substantive equality focuses on redressing entrenched disadvantages, addressing stigmas or stereotypes, equal participation, and structural transformation.⁶ Through this lens, the absence of services, legal recognition, and tailored policy responses for male survivors reflects not equality under the law but a failure to address group-specific barriers that inhibit men’s access to justice and support.

Secondly, the report is informed by Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, which refers to the dominant cultural ideal of masculinity that privileges traits such as emotional stoicism, sexual dominance, and physical control.⁷ These ideals render male vulnerability—particularly in the context of sexual assault—invisible and culturally illegible. Male survivors, therefore, do not simply face silence, but an active erasure produced by the incompatibility between victimhood and the social construction of masculinity.

Finally, this analysis treats gender as a socially constructed and relational category. Rather than accepting binary models of gender that equate victimhood with femininity and

⁵ Sandra Fredman, ‘Substantive Equality Revisited’ (2016) 14 *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 712, 712-713.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Polity Press 2005, 2nd Edition) 70–83.

aggression with masculinity, it explores how gender norms shape institutional responses and individual behaviours. As Lorber argues, gender is not innate but performed through daily interactions and enforced through social institutions, making certain behaviours and roles appear 'natural' while marginalising those that deviate from dominant norms.⁸ This perspective highlights how assumptions about men's strength, sexuality, and agency prevent both disclosure and appropriate institutional recognition.

By embedding these theoretical approaches throughout the report, the analysis demonstrates that male underrepresentation is not an anomaly but a symptom of gendered institutional design. Addressing the issue requires not only improved services but a fundamental reconfiguration of gendered assumptions in legal and policy structures to uphold genuine equality for all survivors.

4. Understanding the Issue

Although both men and women can be victims of sexual violence, men remain underrepresented across every stage of the process, from initial reporting of the crime, to recognition by the justice system, to the availability of support services. This underrepresentation is evident in multiple ways:

4.1 Low Reporting Rates

Sexual offences are generally underreported,⁹ but male victims are especially unlikely to come forward. According to the Office for National Statistics, in the year ending March 2022, an estimated 275,000 men in England and Wales experienced sexual assault (including attempts).¹⁰ Yet fewer than one in five (19%) male victims of rape or assault by penetration report the incident to the police.¹¹ This means over 80% of cases go unreported, leaving the majority of male survivors in silence and absent from official statistics. By contrast, while

⁸ Judith Lorber, 'Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender', in *Paradoxes of Gender* (Yale University Press 1994) 13-15, 32-36.

⁹ Office for National Statistics, 'Nature of Sexual Assault by Rape or Penetration, England and Wales: Year Ending March 2020' (18 March 2021) 1 and 2.

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, 'Sexual offences in England and Wales Overview: Year Ending March 2022' (23 March 2023). Note that the statistics relate to victims aged 16 and above only.

women also underreport, the public and authorities at least expect that women can be rape victims – an understanding not equally afforded to men.

This imbalance is illustrated in Natasha McKeever's account of two friends who were raped while intoxicated.¹² When the victim was female, the incident was immediately recognised as rape. When the victim was male, however, it was treated as a joke, with people asking if his rapist had been 'hot'.¹³ This contrast shows how male victimisation is often minimised rather than acknowledged, reinforcing why men are less likely to report sexual assault.

4.2 Lack of Recognition and Visibility

Men's experiences of sexual assault have long been hidden or ignored in societal discourse. Sexual violence is often discussed under the banner of 'violence against women and girls' (VAWG), implicitly excluding male victims.¹⁴ High-profile campaigns and movements (from #MeToo to government initiatives) have overwhelmingly highlighted women's stories, with male survivors rarely visible. As the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales pointed out, male survivors have sometimes been treated as an afterthought in policy documents.¹⁵ Until recently, there was little acknowledgement in official strategies that men, too, are affected by sexual violence. This lack of visibility contributes to a self-perpetuating cycle: men don't see people like themselves in awareness campaigns or services, which reinforces the notion that 'this issue isn't about us'.

4.3 Unequal Support Services

Historically, support infrastructure for sexual assault survivors was developed by and for women. Rape Crisis centres, sexual assault referral centres (SARCs), and therapy services largely catered to female survivors, and many were not open to men. Even today, only about

¹² Natasha McKeever, 'Can a Woman Rape a Man and Why Does It Matter?' (2019) 13 *Criminal Law and Philosophy* 599.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Vera Baird, '2020/21 Annual Report of the Victims' Commissioner 2020 to 2021' (CP463, 2021) 1 and 37.

¹⁵ Victims' Commissioner, 'Male survivors are an "afterthought" in Home Office policy document', *Victim Commissioner's Website News* (6 April 2022). Available at: <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/news/male-survivors-are-an-afterthought-in-home-office-policy-document/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

half of Rape Crisis member centres in England and Wales offer specific services for men and boys.¹⁶ The other half that do not will refer male survivors elsewhere,¹⁷ but that extra step can be a barrier. While there are a few specialist charities for male survivors (e.g. SurvivorsUK, Safeline's male helpline), coverage is uneven and often underfunded. In short, a man seeking help after sexual assault may struggle to find a service that is prepared to support him, unlike a woman who can usually access well-established women's support networks. This disparity in support availability is a concrete manifestation of gender inequality and a lack of gender inclusion in addressing sexual violence.

4.4 Gendered Legal Definitions

In law, too, male victimisation has been under-recognised. Until 1994, men were not legally recognised as victims of rape in England and Wales. Rather, the offence of rape was defined such that only women could be raped (men suffering penetrative sexual attacks had perpetrators charged under different offences such as 'buggery').¹⁸ The law changed with the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (CJ&POA 1994) and later the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (SOA 2003), which expanded the definition of rape to include male victims.¹⁹ However, a notable gap remains: a female perpetrator cannot be charged with 'rape' in UK law, since rape legally requires penile penetration.²⁰ If a man is forced to penetrate a perpetrator (male or female) without consent, it is prosecuted as "causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent" (s.4 SOA 2003) or as sexual assault (ss.2 and 3 SOA 2003). These offences carry the same maximum sentence, but lack the societal recognition of the word rape. This legal distinction may seem technical, but it has symbolic importance: it can leave male survivors of female aggressors feeling that what happened to them is not being labelled as seriously as 'rape'. In sum, although the law today does include male victims, historical exclusion and remaining gaps contribute to a sense that male sexual victimisation is not fully acknowledged by the justice system.

¹⁶ Rape Crisis, England & Wales, 'Support for men and boys', <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/support-for-men-and-boys/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ George Severs, 'Male Rape: Survivors, Support and the Law in Late Twentieth-Century England and Wales' (2024) 97 *History Workshop Journal* 196, 197.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Sexual Offences Act 2003, s.1.

4.5 Psychological Impact and Isolation

As a result of the above factors, many male survivors internalise the idea that what happened to them is rare or even unique. They often experience profound isolation.²¹ One counsellor who works with male survivors noted that her clients frequently feel alone and question if “it is just me” – even as they are “surrounded by other people’s accounts of sexual violation” in the media.²² The difference is that those accounts are usually about women. This can make male survivors feel “utterly on [their] own” with their trauma.²³ The sense of not fitting the mould of being a ‘real victim’ (typically envisioned as female) can worsen men’s mental health outcomes.

Indeed, research indicates male survivors suffer many of the same effects as female survivors – PTSD, depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation²⁴ – but with the added burden of societal invisibility and suppressed grief. This underlines why treating male sexual assault as a gender equality issue is crucial: no survivor should have to suffer in silence due to gendered expectations.

To conclude this framing section, it is important to stress that highlighting men’s underrepresentation is not about pitting genders against each other or downplaying violence against women. Rather, it is about ensuring all survivors are heard and helped. Just as society has learned (and is still learning) to ‘believe women’ when they disclose rape, we must also create an environment where men can come forward without fear of ridicule or dismissal. The following analysis delves into the key causes behind men’s reluctance or inability to come forward, and why institutions have struggled to reach gender parity in this realm.

²¹ SurvivorsUK, ‘Breaking the silence’, <https://www.survivorsuk.org/breaking-the-silence/> (last accessed 22 September 2025).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ ONS (n9).

5. Causes of the Issue

Male underrepresentation in sexual assault cases is driven by a range of interrelated causes, from cultural stigma and legal blind spots to institutional neglect and gendered policy design. While these factors are often treated as isolated challenges, this report uses a gender equality framework – drawing on Fredman’s theory of substantive equality, Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, and the social construction of gender – to show that male underrepresentation is not a marginal issue but a symptom of systemic inequality. Addressing it requires dismantling the gendered assumptions embedded in cultural narratives, legal categories, and public policy.

5.1 Cultural and Societal Stigma

Societal stigma surrounding male sexual victimisation plays a foundational role in silencing survivors. Cultural norms rooted in hegemonic masculinity – Connell’s term for the dominant ideal of masculinity that prizes strength, sexual control, and emotional restraint²⁵ – frame victimhood as incompatible with being a man. From an early age, boys are conditioned to be stoic and self-reliant, discouraging emotional vulnerability.²⁶ As Louis Theroux, a documentarian and journalist, noted, “we have certain stereotypes of men needing to be strong...not speak about their emotions”.²⁷ These norms lead many male survivors to internalise shame and denial, with some even struggling to identify as victims.²⁸

Seen through Fredman’s lens of substantive equality, these norms are more than social pressures – they are structural barriers.²⁹ When society discourages men from seeking help or even recognising abuse, it restricts their access to justice and support. As Lorber argues, gender is socially constructed and performed through everyday interactions.³⁰ In this context,

²⁵ Connell (n7).

²⁶ B Kennath Widanaralalage, Benjamin Hine, Antony Murphy and Karim Murji, ‘I Didn’t Feel I Was a Victim’: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Experiences of Male-on-Male Survivors of Rape and Sexual Abuse’ (2022) 17 *Victims & Offenders* 1147, 1148.

²⁷ SurvivorsUK, ‘Louis Theroux presents BBC Radio 4 appeal for male rape and sexual abuse charity SurvivorsUK’, Press Release (14 July 2017), https://www.survivorsuk.org/press_media/louis-theroux-presents-bbc-radio-4-appeal-for-male-rape-and-sexual-abuse-charity-survivorsuk/ (last accessed 22 September 2025).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Fredman (n5) 728–729.

³⁰ Lorber (n8) 13–17, 25–27.

silence is not an individual choice; it is enforced.³¹ Tackling stigma is therefore a gender equality and inclusion issue: unless these norms are challenged, men will continue to be excluded from support systems designed to serve all survivors.

5.2 Gender Stereotypes and Myths

Misconceptions about male victimhood are reinforced by entrenched rape myths and gender stereotypes. One of the most harmful myths is that men cannot be raped by women – an idea rooted in biological essentialism and the assumption that male arousal always implies consent.³² The SOA 2003 reflects this bias by defining rape strictly as penile penetration, thereby excluding cases where men are coerced into sex. This distinction denies male survivors' equal legal recognition and perpetuates the belief that their trauma matters less.

Connell's framework helps explain why these myths persist: hegemonic masculinity positions men as dominant and sexually invulnerable, making male victimhood seem illegitimate.³³ Other myths – such as if the perpetrator is male, the victim must be gay (or will be perceived as gay)³⁴ – further isolate survivors. These myths do not merely reflect ignorance; they institutionalise inequality by defining who is allowed to be seen as a victim.

From a substantive equality perspective, equality before the law is insufficient if legal and cultural frameworks continue to marginalise certain groups.³⁵ A system that reinforces myths and restricts legal definitions of harm is not gender-neutral; it is gendered. Dismantling these myths is therefore essential to addressing male underrepresentation as a gender equality issue.

5.3 Legal and Institutional Barriers

The UK's legal definition of rape excludes cases where men are forced to penetrate, making

³¹ Ibid.

³² Siobhan Weare, "Oh You're a Guy, How Could You Be Raped by a Woman, That Makes No Sense": Towards a Case for Legally Recognising and Labelling "Forced-to-Penetrate" Cases as Rape' (2017) 14 *International Journal of Law in Context* 110.

³³ Connell (n7).

³⁴ Widanaralage et al. (n26) 1157.

³⁵ Fredman (n5) 714–717.

many feel their experiences are not taken seriously and discouraging them from reporting.

This exclusion is reinforced by institutional attitudes. Police responses have historically lacked sensitivity toward male survivors, who often face disbelief or inappropriate questioning. As Richie McMullen observed decades ago, male victims were “rarely believed [and] are assumed to be gay and thought to be responsible for not being man enough to fight off their attacker”.³⁶ These views, rooted in hegemonic masculinity,³⁷ continue to shape how institutions recognise – or fail to recognise – male trauma.

Such gendered assumptions mean that male survivors are not just overlooked; they are structurally excluded, contributing directly to their underrepresentation in sexual assault data.

5.4 Lack of Recognition in Policy Frameworks

Male survivors are largely sidelined in the UK’s core sexual violence strategies. The VAWG Strategy, while important, treats men as peripheral.³⁸ As a result, male-specific services are often underfunded or overlooked in training and service delivery.

Attempts at inclusion, such as the Home Office’s 2022 statement on male victims, have lacked visibility and substance, criticised by Dame Vera Baird as “devoid of ambition”. This marginalisation makes support harder to access and contributes to low reporting rates.³⁹

Fredman’s theory of substantive equality shows why formal recognition is not enough—policy must address group-specific disadvantage.⁴⁰ Lorber’s view of gender as socially constructed helps explain why male trauma is often ignored: it clashes with dominant ideas of masculinity. Until male survivors are meaningfully included in national policy, their underrepresentation will persist.

³⁶ Philip Rumney, ‘Policing Male Rape and Sexual Assault’ (2008) 72 *The Journal of Criminal Law* 67.

³⁷ Connell (n7).

³⁸ ONS (n10); Baird (n14).

³⁹ Baird, *ibid*.

⁴⁰ Fredman (n5) 720-724.

6. Recommendations

6.1 *Raise Awareness through Gender-Inclusive Campaigns and Education*

Public understanding of sexual violence must shift to recognise that victimhood is not gendered. Awareness campaigns, school curricula, and public health messaging should:

- Include male survivor testimonies alongside women's stories to normalise male disclosure.
- Address rape myths, such as 'men can't be raped' or 'arousal implies consent', by referencing physiological facts and survivor experiences.
- Challenge masculinity norms that discourage emotional openness or equate vulnerability with weakness.

6.2 *Reform Policy and Institutions to Reflect Substantive Equality*

To fulfil the principle of substantive gender equality, institutions must be redesigned to reflect the different barriers faced by male survivors. Key reforms include:

- Amending the legal definition of rape to recognise cases where a man is forced to penetrate without consent. This would address the current symbolic and practical hierarchy of harm.
- Mandating gender-inclusive training across the criminal justice system, including police, Crown Prosecution Service, and Sexual Assault Referral Centres. Training must cover unconscious bias, gender diversity, and trauma-informed responses to male survivors.
- Mainstreaming male victimhood into national strategies, not through token references but by setting dedicated targets and Key Performance Indicators for male-inclusive services within strategies such as VAWG or future unified frameworks.

6.3 *Strengthen Male-Specific Support Services and Networks*

Equity in access to support requires targeted investment in services that address the specific needs of male survivors, including those shaped by stigma and isolation. To do this:

- Expand the Male Rape Support Fund, ensuring regional coverage and long-term stability for organisations like SurvivorsUK and Safeline.
- Develop peer support groups and survivor-led initiatives that empower men to speak and support others.
- Create specialist helplines and drop-in centres for men and boys, including LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces, ensuring that intersectional experiences are considered in service design.
- Encourage cross-sector collaboration between health, education, social care, and criminal justice sectors to create integrated survivor pathways that don't assume victim gender.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this report has argued that meaningful inclusion of male survivors is a test of our commitment to gender equality and inclusion. It is not about diluting support for women, but about upholding the principle that no survivor should be overlooked because of their gender. By dismantling harmful norms, reforming systems, and investing in inclusive support, we can build a society where all survivors – regardless of sex, gender, or background – are heard, believed, and helped.