

What are Rape Myths?

Sexual assault and rape are frightening and distressing issues. Societies develop beliefs, myths & attitudes about why rape and sexual assault happen, to protect ourselves from facing the reality of these issues. These myths are not borne out in evidence. They protect the perpetrator and allow abusive behaviours to go unchallenged.

We need to be aware of and alert to the extent to which we have internalised misinformed beliefs, myths and attitudes, so we can challenge and manage these within ourselves and ensure they do not interfere with our ability to be helpful and supportive to victim/survivors of sexual violence.

Myth: Victims cause rape by their dress and behaviour

Fact: How you dress or how you behave is never a reason for assault. When we question what victim/survivors were wearing or doing when they were raped or sexually assaulted, we focus on their behaviour, instead of what happened to them. The only person responsible for an act of sexual violence is the perpetrator.

This myth is an example of how victim blame can make us distrust victim/survivors and can cause victim/survivors to believe that they deserved to be raped or assaulted, or were “asking for it”.

Compared to other crimes, rapes and sexual assaults see the victim more frequently blamed, and less likely to be believed [2]. It can compound the impact of sexual violence on the victim and can prevent them from telling someone or reporting the incident(s).



Myth: Men are not raped, or only gay men are raped

Fact: Men are raped & assaulted. Assaults on men are very under-reported, for reasons such as how men are socialised or their fears of being labelled, so it is difficult to be sure of the true extent.

In 2024, 14% of callers to the National Helpline and 12% of DRCC counselling clients were men. Many are men who experienced rape, sexual assault, and/or child sexual abuse.

It can be more difficult for men to disclose sexual violence they have experienced, because of the impact of rape myths like this one. For example, a recent survey found that 66% of men who experienced sexual violence as a child had never disclosed this experience to anyone before. [1]





Myth: Many accusations of rape are false and people lie about rape to get revenge

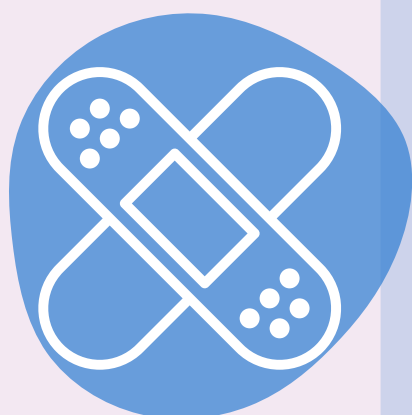
Fact: False accusations of rape are extremely rare. Research has shown that false accusations of rape generally are about 2% to 8%; the same, if not lower, than every other crime category [4]. UK data indicates that less than 1% of rape claims are false. In reality, rape and sexual violence are under-reported, and in the CSO's sexual violence study (2022), only 5% of people who had ever disclosed sexual violence had reported it to the police [5].

This type of rape myth causes our doubt and distrust to fall on the victim/survivor of sexual violence, and to question what happened to them or how it happened, instead of on the perpetrator.

Myth: Only attractive young women are raped

Fact: Anyone can be a victim of rape. Women of any age, appearance, social class, ethnic origin and intellectual ability are vulnerable to rape. Men and children are also raped. People with physical or intellectual disabilities are raped.

In a war situation, women can be raped as a policy of intimidation, revenge or demoralization, and in that case all women, from the very youngest to the very oldest, may be targeted.



Myth: It wasn't violent... there were no injuries, so it wasn't rape

Fact: Rape does not always involve physical violence. In Irish law, rape is recognised as non-consensual sexual intercourse. Physical violence is not an essential element of this crime. 'Non-consensual' may mean the perpetrator coerced the victim/survivor, that is, he or she forced the person using intimidation, threats or fear. Rape that does not involve physical violence is still rape, and is still incredibly impactful.

Also, some people cannot give consent, such as when asleep, unconscious or under the influence of drugs, young people aged under 17 or people with certain disabilities.

Myth: They didn't say "no", so it wasn't rape, and if you really want to, you can stop a rape

Fact: It is not always possible to say 'no'. People have a variety of responses to danger. A person may freeze up in response to a threat, unable to move or speak. Alternatively, the person may seek to mollify or 'befriend' the attacker, hoping that this will help them avoid harm.

All these responses are automatic – a person has no control over which way they will react. It does not mean they consent to the activity. Consent must be ongoing and given freely. The onus is on the perpetrator, and never the victim/survivor, to stop rape or sexual violence.



Myth: It's not rape if it's your partner/boyfriend/girlfriend, or if you've been sexually active with them in the past, because people are usually raped by strangers

Fact: Most sexual violence and rape happens between people who know each other. Among DRCC therapy clients in 2024, some 96% of those abused as children and 88% of those assaulted as adults said that they knew the perpetrator; in the latter category, a fifth said that the perpetrator was their partner [3].

This rape myth may make it difficult for victim/survivors to recognise what happened to them as rape, and it may also mean that they are at a greater risk of experiencing sexual violence or rape again. This can lead to social isolation, job loss, or dropping out of education – a huge impact.



Myth: Rape is caused by overwhelming sexual desire

Fact: Sexual assault & rape are acts of violence driven by the wish to dominate or degrade. The perpetrator overrules the victim/survivor's own wishes through coercion or overt violence. It is false to think that men, or anyone, cannot control their sexual desire and rape or sexually assault people because of this.

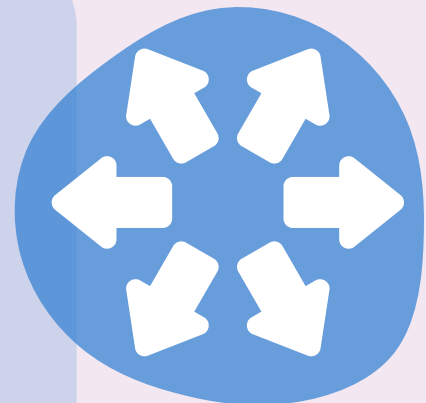


Myth: Sexual harassment is not a big deal

Fact: Sexual harassment can have a huge impact on a victim/survivor, and can change how they see and interact with the world. The impacts of sexual harassment can include fear and shame, anxiety, depression, increased stress and fatigue as well as distrust of others.

This myth leads to perpetrators of sexual harassment being excused for their behaviour, which is a crime.

Sexual harassment is one of the most common forms of sexual abuse, with 75% of respondents in one survey in Ireland saying that they had experienced sexual harassment [6].



Myth: Women don't rape

Fact: Women can carry out acts of rape and sexual violence, against other women, against men, and against children. Although sexual violence is a gendered crime, and the majority of rapes and sexual assaults are committed by men, it is important to remember there is no "one" type of perpetrator, as there is no "one" type of victim.

When a victim/survivor makes a disclosure of sexual violence or rape, they should be listened to, and believed. The onus of the act must always fall on the perpetrator, no matter their gender, age or identity

Remember: You can call the 24-hour National Helpline at 1800 77 8888 at any time to receive free, confidential support.

Sources:

[1] [3] [5] [CSO Central Statistics Office Sexual Violence Survey 2022](#)

[2] <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/13023/>

[4] <https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/health/services/promotion/sexual-assault-dating-violence/myths-about-sexual-assault-reports>

[6] <https://www.irisht Examiner.com/news/arid-40711262.html>

Further Reading:

- [Victim Blame in Ireland](#)
- ["21% of Irish think sex without consent is sometimes ok"](#)
- [Impact of Rape Myths on Victim/Survivors](#)
- [Impact of Sexual Harassment](#)
- [Consent: What Do I Need to Know?](#)
- [DRCC Annual Report 2024](#)
- [Sexual Violence in Ireland Statistics](#)
- [Finding Your Way after Sexual Violence](#)