

### Victim Blaming and Self Blame

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Victim blaming is not unique to sexual violence or to women, but the way in which women are blamed for sexual violence perpetrated against them by men has become a central feature of victim blaming literature, and of wider cultures, media, religion, beliefs, justice and public health campaigns. Simply put, victim blaming is the transference of blame for an act of sexual violence away from the perpetrator of the violence and back towards the victim of the violence.

In sexual violence against women, victim blaming includes the blaming of the woman's character, behaviour, appearance, decisions or situation for being subjected to sexual violence, rather than the attribution of blame towards the male offender who committed the act. Victim blaming is generally split into behavioural, characterological and situational blame; however, they often overlap:

- ❖ Behavioural victim blaming blames the behaviour of the woman as the reason for the sexual violence perpetrated against her
- ❖ Characterological blaming blames her character or personality for the sexual violence perpetrated against her
- ❖ Situational blaming places the blame on the situation the woman or girl was in, rather than blaming the perpetrator for choosing to commit violence

Therefore, all victim blaming minimises or erases the actions and choices of the offender from their own offence.

'Self-blame' is defined as a cognitive process of attribution that tends to be defined based on two categories: behavioural self-blame and characterological self-blame:

- ❖ Behavioural self-blame is the attribution of deserved blame to self, based on behaviour or action. This type of self-blame leads to people considering how different behaviours or actions could have protected them or stopped the event from happening.
- ❖ Characterological self-blame is the attribution of undeserved blame to self, based on internal character or personality. This type of self-blame leads to people believing that there is something internally or personally wrong with them that caused the event to happen.

Self-blame is also not unique to sexual violence, but studies have found that when women and girls experience victim blaming or negative reactions when they disclose sexual violence, they are more likely to blame themselves.

Further, existing research suggests that women and girls use the messages they receive from society and support networks to measure whether they think someone will blame them for sexual violence and to assess whether the rape, sexual assault or abuse was their fault.

## How Do People Blame Women and Girls For Sexual Violence?

Victim blaming can sound like lots of different things. Sometimes it sounds like misogyny, 'She went out looking like a slut, so it's no wonder she was raped'. Sometimes it sounds like logic, 'Women should keep themselves safe, they don't leave the house without locking the door in case they are burgled, so why is this any different?'

Sometimes victim blaming can sound like concern or compassion, 'I hope she will be okay, and she learns from her mistakes and doesn't put herself in that situation again'.

Victim blaming can even sound like ideology, religion or beliefs about justice and fairness, 'If this happened to her, she must have done something to deserve it. Life has a way of rewarding or punishing you for how you live your life – what goes around comes around.'

Victim blaming is so diverse that it can also sound like personal safety advice that impedes on women and girls' lives, 'If you are going out tonight, remember not to leave your friends or drink too much. Always drink responsibly to protect yourself from sexual assault.'

As you can see from these examples, how people victim blame women and girls for sexual violence varies from person to person and from authority to authority. Often, victim blaming is a mixture of misogyny, bias, stereotypes, attribution error and beliefs about safety and justice. Arguably, this could be why it is so hard to tackle and sometimes hard to recognise.

Women and girls can be blamed for sexual violence in the following ways:

- ❖ Being told to change the way they look or act
- ❖ Being told to stop going to every day venues like pubs, bars, leisure centres, gyms or cafes
- ❖ Being told not to go out or walk anywhere at night
- ❖ Being told to take responsibility for the sexual desire and behaviour of men
- ❖ Being told that they are mentally ill or have a disorder after they are raped or assaulted
- ❖ Being told their actions and or behaviours led to a rapist attacking them
- ❖ Being told their experiences are made up, fantasies or malicious
- ❖ Being asked what they were wearing at the time of the offence (underwear, clothes or makeup)
- ❖ Being asked why they didn't fight back, whether they asserted themselves enough or why they 'allowed' it to happen
- ❖ Being asked why they didn't report earlier or being blamed for risking other women and girls by not reporting earlier
- ❖ Being told they need to make better choices and decisions to stop themselves from being raped or abused

This is not an exhaustive list, of course. Women and girls can be blamed for anything from their body weight and ethnicity right the way through to drinking alcohol or staying with an abusive husband. Women and girls who are subjected to sexual violence or abuse are likely to have heard many different forms of victim blaming, either directed at them or women and girls in general. The way they are blamed is important because it may influence the way they feel about the rape or abuse. For example, if a woman or girl has been told that she was raped because she looks a certain way, she might start to cover her body or hate her own body. Whereas a woman or girl who has been told that she was raped because she didn't say no clearly enough or didn't fight the rapist off may conclude that she must have 'wanted it' or feel as if she colluded or encouraged the offender by staying still.

## How Do Women and Girls Talk About Blaming Themselves For Sexual Violence?

The most recent research on this topic comes from my work on the psychology of victim blaming. The studies included interviews with women who had been blamed for sexual violence, to ask them to talk about their experiences and understanding of being blamed.

Previous research had suggested that women and girls absorb victim blaming and self-blame messages from society which causes them to believe they were to blame for sexual violence. Whilst this is not completely incorrect, it did position women and girls as submissively accepting the narrative of victim blaming and self-blame rather than seeing them as intelligent and dynamic. The new research shows that women talk in complicated and contradictory ways about victim blaming and self-blame. To illustrate this point, the following are some real examples of how women talked about blame:

- ❖ I would never blame other women and girls the way I blame myself. I know they are not to blame for sexual violence, but I feel like I am
- ❖ I changed everything about myself after I was raped. I changed my hair, my dress, my job, but deep down I knew it wouldn't protect me from rape
- ❖ I know logically that I am not really to blame for sexual violence, but I still feel like I am
- ❖ I don't think it is my fault... but then maybe it was God who was punishing me for something?
- ❖ I just overthink everything. I think 'maybe it was my fault, maybe I led him on, but then I think... I don't really lead people on, but he said I did'. I just don't know what to think anymore.

As shown in the examples, the way women talk about being blamed or blaming themselves for sexual violence does not support the previous theory that they have simply absorbed victim blaming beliefs from society and applied them to themselves and others.

In fact, the newer research shows that women have contradictory, complex and dynamic discourses around victim blaming and self-blame, in which they often believe and disbelieve at the same time. They are often heard to be openly questioning whether they were to blame or not. This is important, because it suggests that women might not wholly believe they are to blame but are confused by the amount of people or authorities that are trying to make them take the blame or feel to blame.

## Why Do So Many People Blame Women and Girls For Sexual Violence Committed Against Them?

Theories of victim blaming are varied, and all try to suggest what motivates us to blame the victim. Generally, theories of victim blaming include the following:

### Belief In A Just World

We victim blame because we have a strongly embedded bias that causes us to want to believe that the world is a just and fair place in which only bad things happen to bad people who deserve it.

### Attribution Bias

We victim blame because we fail to attribute causation to negative events properly due to a cognitive bias.

### Defensive Attribution Hypothesis

We victim blame when we perceive the victim to be very different from us (age, ethnicity, country, sexuality, culture). This theory argues that the more similar we are to the victim, the more empathy we have for them and the less we will blame them.

**Rape Myth Acceptance**

We victim blame because we believe myths and stereotypes about rape and sexual assaults. These myths mean we are more likely to believe women lie about rape or that there is a set of criteria that make up a 'real rape'.

**Sexism and Misogyny**

We victim blame because of a prejudice against women and girls. We blame the woman or girl for things that are inherently female or feminine. E.g. She was wearing a skirt, she was wearing too much make-up, she was too flirty, she led him on, she is promiscuous.

**Perceived Control and Counterfactual Thinking**

We victim blame and self-blame because it makes us feel more in control of our safety and the world. We reason backwards to consider if our actions or decisions caused the rape or abuse. E.g. 'If I never went to my sisters, none of this would have happened!'

For more information about sexism and misogyny or victim blaming, please visit [www.victimfocus.org.uk](http://www.victimfocus.org.uk) or contact Jessica on [jessica@victimfocus.org.uk](mailto:jessica@victimfocus.org.uk)