

‘Nobody believes you if you’re a bloke’: Barriers to disclosure and help-seeking for male forced-to-penetrate victims/survivors

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Abstract

Research on barriers that exist for male victims/survivors of sexual abuse in relation to disclosing their experiences is limited. This article shares qualitative data in relation to disclosure and help-seeking barriers encountered by male victims/survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse. Findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 male victims/survivors in the United Kingdom about their forced-to-penetrate (FTP) experiences are discussed. FTP cases involve a man being FTP, with his penis and without his consent, the vagina, anus, or mouth of a woman. During their interviews, male victims/survivors shared multiple barriers which resulted in delayed, selective, limited, or no disclosure. These included; masculinity, feelings of shame and self-blame, struggling to understand and label experiences, concerns about the consequences of disclosure, and a lack of (knowledge about) support. These barriers are critically discussed and positioned within their broader contexts and consideration is given to how they can be overcome by those most likely to engage with male FTP victims/survivors.

Keywords

Male victims, sexual violence, help-seeking, female perpetrators, disclosure, qualitative data

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Introduction

Research on barriers that exist for male victims/survivors of sexual abuse in relation to disclosing their experiences (Sivagurunathan et al., 2019; Sorsoli et al., 2008) is limited in the academic literature, especially when compared with that which explores the experiences of female survivors (see, for example, Evans and Feder, 2016; Lelaurain et al., 2017). This article makes a novel and significant contribution to knowledge by sharing qualitative data in relation to disclosure and help-seeking barriers encountered by male victims/survivors of female-perpetrated sexual abuse – a sub-section of male victims'/survivors' experiences that are even less visible. More specifically, the article examines the barriers to disclosure and help-seeking discussed by 30 male victims/survivors in the United Kingdom (UK) in interviews about their forced-to-penetrate (FTP) experiences. These FTP cases involve a man being FTP, with his penis and without his consent, the vagina, anus, or mouth of a woman (Weare, 2018: 110). The term FTP is used here because under current criminal laws in the UK only men, and not women, can be convicted as principal offenders of rape (e.g. The Sexual Offences Act (SOA), 2003, section 1).

Examining and understanding barriers to disclosure and help-seeking for male FTP survivors is essential to ensure that their support needs are met, as well as to develop effective strategies to improve access to support for this group of men. In the context of this article, disclosure and help-seeking are broadly conceived and refer to male FTP victim/survivors' experiences of disclosure to family, friends, health practitioners such as GPs, and support services. While not specifically focusing on barriers to disclosure to police or other criminal justice agencies, there are likely to be overlaps with these groups, and as such many of the findings may be relevant within such contexts. It should also be noted that the term victim/survivor is used throughout this article when discussing the experiences of men who have been FTP a woman. This term is used in recognition of the fact that individually, the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' can hold different, specific, and often contested meanings, and thus the use of the term 'victim/survivor' aims to go beyond the binary and recognise the complex reality of many men's lived experiences.

Literature review

It is recognised that the barriers to disclosure faced by male victims/survivors are likely to differ considerably from those for female victims/survivors (see, for example, Hammond et al., 2017; Pino and Meier, 1999; Sable et al., 2006). To this end, there is a body of research that, while still in its infancy, is growing, and considers the specific gender-based disclosure barriers faced by male victims/survivors of sexual violence. This is particularly the case in relation to male victims/survivors of *male*-perpetrated sexual abuse (see, for example, Widanaralalage et al., 2022). In comparison, where research has considered barriers to disclosure for male victims/survivors of *female*-perpetrated sexual abuse, it has been much more limited in both depth and scope. Indeed, no existing research, prior to this project (Weare and Hulley, 2019), has specifically addressed the barriers faced by male FTP victims/survivors within the UK.

While there is no previous direct research addressing the barriers faced by men who are FTP women in the UK, the broader scholarship around barriers to disclosure and help-seeking faced by male victims/survivors in other contexts, for example, childhood sexual abuse, male rape, and intimate partner violence, provides some important and relevant insights within which to position this study. Indeed, studies have found that regardless of the sex of the perpetrator, gender norms

and expectations in relation to masculinity can, and do, act as barriers to disclosure and help-seeking (Donne et al., 2018; Widanaralalage et al., 2022). Men are socially constructed as ‘invulnerable and powerful and male bodies as impenetrable’ (Hlavka, 2017: 483), undoubtedly resulting in fears for male victims/survivors that their experiences will be trivialised, minimised, or ignored. Similarly, male victims/survivors often fear any sexual abuse disclosure that they make will not be believed (Crown Prosecution Service, 2017: 2; HM Government, 2019: 3). In the context of male-on-male sexual violence and abuse, societal, and internalised homophobic assumptions often act as barriers to disclosure; for heterosexual men, they may be concerned that ‘their sexuality will be questioned’ (Crown Prosecution Service, 2017: 2), or that they will be labelled as ‘gay’. For gay men, ‘fear of their sexuality being revealed’ or of being discriminated against due to the structural and culturally specific inequalities that exist for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual and queer or questioning + people may be particularly relevant (HM Government, 2019: 3). Within these contexts, male rape myths, which often evaluate male victims/survivors against stereotypical constructions of masculinity (Hine et al., 2021) may also be relevant to men’s disclosure decisions, as well as the subsequent experiences they have if they do decide to disclose.

In the context of female-on-male sexual violence, gender and sex role stereotypes around male sexual insatiability and female sexual passivity result in men being more readily recognised as perpetrators and women as victims than vice versa. These stereotypes presume that men are the initiators of sexual activity and that they are constantly aware of, and pursue, potential sexual opportunities (O’Sullivan et al., 1998: 191). In contrast, ‘women are expected to influence men to avoid sex, not to have sex’ and they are stereotyped as ‘passive, responsive, and receptive’ (Muehlenhard, 1998: 30). As such, female-perpetrated sexual abuse ‘challenges dominant paradigms of sexual harm and risk, particularly in a heteronormative culture’ (Hlavka, 2017: 483), which can make it difficult for men to disclose such experiences. Indeed, within this context, myths and stereotypes around female-on-male sexual abuse can prevent male victims/survivors from help-seeking. Such myths include that a man must consent to sex with a woman if he is sexually aroused, and a man could stop a woman from having sex with him because he is bigger and stronger than her (Weare, 2021).

Existing research has highlighted that feelings of shame are almost universal in their power to silence men and women by making them feel trapped, powerless, and isolated (see, for example, Brown, 2006). For both male and female victims/survivors of sexual abuse, it is well recognised that shame can act as a significant barrier to disclosure and prevent help-seeking (see, for example, Vidal and Petrak, 2007; Weiss, 2010). As Hlavka (2017) notes within the context of male victims/survivors, ‘men who are sexually victimized confront a set of stigmatizing cultural narratives that contribute to a unique sense of shame’ (p. 485). This is perhaps unsurprising given that shame is recognised as ‘a web of layered, conflicting, and competing expectations that are, at the core, products of rigid socio-cultural expectations’ (Brown, 2006: 46). Weiss (2010) notes how shame can have different impacts on disclosure for male victims/survivors. Some men may ‘blame themselves for failing in their masculine roles’ (Weiss, 2010: 300) because they were unable to prevent their victimisation. Others may struggle to acknowledge their victimisation due to feelings of shame and emasculation, often stemming from the stereotype and rape myth that real men cannot be raped (Hine et al., 2021: 12; Weiss, 2010: 300). Finally, male victims/survivors may be ‘ashamed of the potential that their incidents will expose or “unmask” them’ (Weiss, 2010: 300). Unwilling to risk such exposure and emasculation they do not disclose their experiences of sexual abuse. For heterosexual men who are abused by women, shame may especially act as a barrier to disclosure

because of the gendered challenges posed by ‘admitting that they didn’t want to have sex with women, or that they were forced to sexually submit to women, [which] inverts heterosexual roles and violates (hetero)sexual norms’ (Weiss, 2010: 301).

Male victims/survivors may also struggle in terms of knowing who to disclose to or knowing the best places to seek help and support, particularly when specialist male support services are lacking. Indeed, Donne et al. (2018: 198), note that there can be practical barriers for men who wish to access support services, including cost if they need to pay, and finding the “‘right fit” [that is] a professional who would . . . understand their perspectives, support them in a non-judgmental way, and create a connection’ (p. 196). Specifically for male victims/survivors of female perpetrated abuse, gendered understandings of rape and sexual violence within both society and the law can also act as a barrier to disclosure (Fisher and Pina, 2013: 59). The gendered language used in relation to sexual violence where victims are ‘she/her’ and perpetrators are ‘he/his’ (Fisher and Pina, 2013: 59) can also make it difficult for male victims/survivors to accurately label their experiences, which can itself act as another barrier to disclosure.

The findings presented in this article, focusing specifically on barriers for male victims/survivors in FTP cases, provide important new insights. While some of the findings presented here overlap or link with those found within the existing literature, others do not. Novel dimensions and insights in relation to barriers already recognised are also shared. Understanding the specific barriers to disclosure and help-seeking faced by male FTP victims/survivors is important to enable these barriers to be broken down and effectively addressed, particularly by those organisations and individuals who men may engage with.

Method

This research study was conducted between May 2018 and July 2019, with semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 men from the UK who self-described as having been FTP a woman during their lifetime. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate data collection method because they allowed for men’s subjective lived experiences to be explored in-depth. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using ‘an open framework that [allowed] focused yet conversational communication [and allowed] both the interviewer and the person being interviewed some flexibility to probe for details or to discuss issues that were not included in the interview guide’ (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005: 130). This interview approach also permitted important and/or interesting issues that arose during the interview to be discussed further where appropriate.

The interview schedule was intentionally kept broad so that the most comprehensive and detailed accounts of men’s FTP experiences could be captured through their own words. Participants were asked to share details about their FTP experience(s), including whether they experienced any other types of abuse or violence, the emotional and physical impacts they experienced, and whether they had disclosed or sought support, and if so from where. In developing the interview schedule, advice was sought from project partners, Survivors Manchester (now We Are Survivors), specialists in delivering male survivor-centric support. They advised on the wording of questions to maximise participant engagement while minimising potential harm (Weare and Hulley, 2023). Participants were able to choose whether they wished to be interviewed online via Skype, via telephone, or face-to-face at Survivors’ Manchester’s offices. Interviews varied in length from 30 to 120 minutes, and all were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

A reflexive approach to thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun et al., 2019) with researchers initially familiarising themselves with the data *as data*, before beginning to generate themes inductively. These initial stages of analysis were done manually (by hand) and independently by each of the researchers, with initial themes then being discussed and further refined collaboratively. To support this manual process of refining and defining themes, computer aided analysis of the transcripts was then undertaken using NVivo. This allowed additional themes and sub-themes to be identified, and for associations between identified themes to be explored.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the FASS-LUMS Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University. As the interviews required participants to share, and thus re-live, potentially traumatic experiences of sexual abuse, the wellbeing of participants was a central consideration. Prior to, during, and following interviews participants were signposted to a range of specialist male survivor and general support services. A 'triage' service was also put in place with Survivors Manchester (now We Are Survivors), whereby specialist support for participants who requested or required it following their interviews was provided immediately, or on the same day (Weare and Hulley, 2023). This helped to ensure that participants were safeguarded and minimised potential re-traumatisation from their involvement in the project. It was also made clear to participants that they did not have to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable with, and that they could pause or end the interview at any time.

Participants

Thirty-two men were initially interviewed as part of this project; however, two interviews were excluded from the final dataset because these participants failed to meet the participation criteria of discussing a FTP experience. The 30 interview participants who made up the study cohort self-described as having been FTP a woman during their lifetime. Participants were invited to be involved via the project's website, and online, print, and social media. Many Voluntary Community and Social Enterprises working with male survivors of sexual abuse, including Survivors Manchester (now We Are Survivors), also shared details of the research to maximise participation. The principal investigator's previous research in this area also supported participation (Weare, 2017), with former research participants expressing a desire to be interviewed for this project, and national press coverage of this work encouraging other men to come forward to be involved in future research projects on FTP cases undertaken by the principal investigator.

Participants were asked to provide some basic demographic information during their interview. The average age based on the 28 men who provided this information was 42.9 years. In terms of sexuality, most men identified as heterosexual (25), with two identifying as homosexual, two as bisexual, and one as queer. Participants came from England (26), Wales (3), and Scotland (1). In terms of the contexts within which their FTP experiences took place, half of the men (15) reported that they had been FTP their female partner within the context of an abusive intimate relationship. As such, many of these men had also experienced other forms of abuse within that relationship, including physical, emotional, and psychological abuse, and coercive control. Other contexts within which men reported being FTP a woman included after their drinks had been spiked while socialising and after they had voluntarily consumed a significant amount of alcohol.

Research findings

The journey to disclosure and help-seeking for participants was not straightforward and was a mixed and complex picture. Some men (3) had never previously disclosed their FTP experiences to anyone, while others had disclosed or sought help from a range of sources, including family, friends, and professionals; the latter including GP's, counsellors, therapists, and specialist support services. Only five men disclosed to the police, and this was usually within the context of reporting other abuse they had experienced from a female partner. Many men waited several years before disclosing and/or seeking support, which echoes findings in the broader literature on male disclosure (Walker et al., 2005: 74). Moreover, it was not uncommon for men to seek support for the *impacts* of their FTP experience(s), without initially disclosing the incident(s) themselves. This was the case for over a third of participants, who most frequently sought help for the mental health impacts of their FTP experiences, without specifying this as the reason for seeking support. Similarly, for the 50% of participants who were FTP their female partner within the context of an abusive intimate relationship/domestic abuse, disclosure specifically of their FTP experience(s) was less common than disclosure of other forms of abuse they experienced, such as physical or financial abuse. FTP experiences specifically were particularly difficult for men to disclose. Participants discussed multiple barriers to disclosure and help-seeking, which resulted in delayed, selective, or limited disclosure, or no disclosure at all. What therefore follows is a discussion of five key barriers to disclosure and help-seeking for male FTP victims/survivors: masculinity, feelings of shame and self-blame, struggling to understand and label their experiences, consequences of disclosure, and lack of support/ knowledge about support. Participant's voices are centred throughout the reporting of these findings, and thus extracts from interviews are incorporated throughout.

Masculinity

Gendered expectations and constructions of men and masculinity were a substantial barrier for participants when disclosing their FTP experiences or seeking help and support. Indeed, for some men their FTP experiences fundamentally challenged their heteronormative perceptions of what it meant to be a man. Participant 23 explained:

The fact that as a man you might be raped, you might be sexually assaulted or whatever it is, goes against the mythos of the male who's the protector and not the one that needs protecting . . . and I think that challenges, I think it challenges our view of ourselves . . . it challenges that view that's been centuries building up, and lots of our institutions, you know state institutions . . . perpetuate that image.

It was not just gendered expectations and heteronormative views that men held in relation to themselves that were challenged, but also those held by others which concerned them, for example, how women and particularly prospective partners would perceive them if they disclosed their FTP experiences. This was explained by Participant 16, who noted, 'What sort of woman wants a man like that, a man who couldn't protect himself and his family and who let that happen to him, all of those things'.

Societal endorsements of stereotypes around men's heterosexuality and sex roles were also presented as significant worries for many men. In particular, the belief that men are not victims of sexual violence, and more specifically that they cannot be forced to have non-consensual sex with a woman. This was central to the experience of Participant 17 when trying to talk to his female friends:

I've told my female friends and I've spoken about rape and stuff like this, and I've said, 'well men get raped by women as well you know' and they've said 'oh don't be so stupid. It can never happen', you know.

Even where men felt it was possible for their FTP experiences to be recognised, they raised concerns that the impacts of their experiences would be judged, minimised, or overlooked entirely because they were men.

I think that masculinity is a bit of a problem when it comes to stuff like this . . . I never told anyone about it, because it was like, I knew I'd be laughed at . . . And I never talked about it to anyone. Not even my best friend at the time, it was like I just don't think that he'd have understood. And he would have probably laughed at me and said 'what are you moaning about? . . . Any other fella would be made up' and I'm like "no, not me". (Participant 12)

Indeed, gender stereotypes around heterosexual male sexual insatiability, which assume that men will *always* consent to sex with women, create a perception that men do not and cannot experience trauma as a result of heterosexual sexual encounters (see, for example, Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson, 1994: 13). Such concerns presented considerable hurdles to male survivors sharing their experiences.

Feelings of shame and self-blame

Feelings of shame were a significant barrier to disclosing FTP experiences. For some men these feelings were linked to, and reinforced by, gendered constructions of masculinity, whereas for others they were quite distinct. In whatever context it emerged, shame was an isolating emotion for many men, making it challenging, or impossible, in some cases to tell others about what had happened or to seek support.

It was in the back of my mind that I ought to report it, but I didn't, and it was embarrassment, shame, you know all, possibly even thinking 'well maybe I'm the only person this has ever happened to, maybe I'm the only man that's ever experienced this'. (Participant 19)

Linked to this were feelings of self-blame, with many men feeling they were responsible for what happened to them in some way.

I think it took me quite a while to process it, I mean, as I say right from the beginning, I felt kind of guilty and shameful myself and thought that it was all me, and that it was all my fault. (Participant 9)

These feelings of self-blame were often particularly acute for participants due to them becoming sexually aroused prior to their FTP experience, which is what physically enabled it to occur, despite them not consenting to what was happening.

At the same point I was thinking well you know, 'yeah why would I, if I really didn't want it, would I get like that' I mean . . . yeah. So, I, I yeah, I guess I was quite young at the time and didn't really sort of know that your body parts react to things in certain ways anyway 'cause of chemicals and stuff and that it's not necessarily a conscious decision, but er yeah, I didn't really feel very good about that. (Participant 9)

Broader concerns around not effectively communicating a lack of consent were also raised by participants in the context of self-blame, for example, not 'saying no', not physically pushing the female perpetrator off, and not setting clear boundaries in relation to sexual activity. For example, Participant 21 explained, 'If as a man you didn't physically say no and attempted to push them off, it's very blurred, isn't it?' For many men the strength and pervasiveness of these feelings of shame and self-blame prevented or delayed disclosure and help-seeking. As described by Participant 30:

There wasn't anybody . . . I could think about telling, because I used to, I mean I used to look in the mirror a lot and feel shame and disgust so I thought 'I can't look at anybody and tell them that'.

Struggling to understand and label their experiences

Many of the men struggled to comprehend or to understand what had happened to them. For some this was because they did not or could not recognise themselves as victims of sexual abuse, at least not immediately after their FTP experience(s). For example, Participant 5 explained, 'I didn't disclose it because I didn't recognise it'. Moreover, the gender dynamics of FTP cases, where the perpetrator is female and the victim is male, acted as a barrier to some men understanding that they had been victimised.

I realise that that's totally not on at all. She's had sex with me without my consent and er that's not okay on any level. But at the time you just think of it as it's okay because it's a woman doing it to a man. (Participant 22)

Men are seen as abusers and, and . . . so I, I found it hard to even see in the context of her being an abuser . . . Because that's not what we're told happens. If she was doing that, it wasn't because she was an abuser it was because, I don't know, it was some other reason, because she couldn't be an abuser because she was a woman. (Participant 8)

In addition, participants struggled to know how to define and label what had happened to them, something which proved to be an additional barrier in relation to disclosure and help-seeking. For some, this was made more difficult because of the sexual arousal they experienced, which is stereotyped as equating consent and even enjoyment (Fuchs, 2004: 117), despite simply being a biological and physiological response to external stimulus. This is something that was discussed by Participant 24:

Yeah, they'd be like 'how did you get raped? That's not rape. If you get a hard on, if you get erect it's not rape'.

Current legislative definitions of rape were also relevant for men struggling to label their experiences, with many participants being aware that current UK rape laws exclude FTP cases due to gendered definitions that require penile penetration of the victim by the perpetrator, thus excluding women from legal recognition as principal offenders (see, for example, SOA, 2003, section 1). At the same time, many participants were unaware if or how their experiences would be legally recognised. This was captured well by Participant 9, who explained:

I was under the assumption at the time erm, it was probably actually what was written down in law at the time, actually I don't know, it might be still the law that it's the actual penetration act that's rape and that you know, as a bloke if you're raped it's if you are penetrated.

The confusion around the law in this area was acutely felt by Participant 18 who believed what happened to him was not a crime, 'Well I know that erm . . . it doesn't, it's not a law. It's not against the law, in a nutshell'.

These challenges around understanding and labelling their experiences meant that some men struggled to find the 'language' to describe accurately and adequately what happened to them, something that was important for many of them to be able to disclose or to seek help. The challenge around labelling was clearly summarised by Participant 24 who explained;

Cause to me it's, er I can't even use the word rape because I've always had this ideology that's been put into my mind by other people that if I get erect, doesn't that mean I want sex? And how can I be raped? Because if I get hard, erect, and somebody is penetrated by me, that's not me being raped . . . and it's just this whole . . . whole topic is very difficult.

Participant 14 also noted that he 'did not have the words to describe exactly what had happened'.

Consequences of disclosure

Many men were concerned about the consequences of disclosing their FTP experience, and most commonly worried that they would not be believed or that their experience would be minimised or 'laughed off':

So er, a big part of female perpetrating of males, there is that whole big bit of nobody's gonna believe you, erm, you know, need to keep quiet about it. (Participant 1)

With regards to men being raped by women, because as far as I'm aware, I kind of think like also, you tell somebody that you know, a woman, if I was to tell my friends 'She did this to me' they'd laugh at me. (Participant 24)

The fear of disbelief experienced by men often directly related to their gender and expectations around men and masculinity. Participant 3 discussed this:

I think they'd think 'Really? A man?' This could happen to a man, a woman did that to a man, men are meant to be masculine, so this is like obviously like not in a man's nature for this to happen.

Similarly, several men focused upon their larger physical stature and strength as men, particularly when compared with the female perpetrator:

That's what I felt would be the problem if I tried to make an issue of it, is it wouldn't be accepted, you know I'm not a small man. I can imagine people thinking 'oh well, you know, he must have wanted it, he must have'. (Participant 7)

I mean I'm just under six foot and I'm about twelve and a half stone so I'm not a big bloke, but I'm a lot bigger than her, she's five foot one, so again, you know? There's that disparity as well. (Participant 26)

There was also concern for some participants that if they disclosed their FTP experiences, particularly to the police, false counter-allegations of sexual or domestic abuse would be made by the female perpetrator. Indeed, for four participants specific threats were made by female perpetrators

to prevent disclosure by these men of the abuse they had experienced. In particular, there was concern that counter-allegations were more likely to be believed by police than reports of their own FTP experiences:

She said if I ever told anybody, or if I ever left, um she'd tell the police that . . . I raped her . . . and there's nothing a guy can do because you know, even though it's false, even though at one point they might be cleared, it's still absolutely life-ruining because you don't lose the tag . . . of rape, ever. (Participant 10)

She said, 'what are you gonna do? I'll start screaming rape . . . do you think they'll believe anything you've got to say?'. (Participant 27)

For a specific group of men, their concerns around consequences of disclosure related to their children. For some this was because they had children with the female perpetrator and therefore were concerned about the impacts that disclosure or help-seeking may have on their relationship with their children. For Participant 6, he did not want his child to know that he had been conceived within the FTP context, 'The particular difficulty is of course, because my son was conceived as a result of this, I have to be, very discreet about it because he mustn't ever know'.

Lack of support/lack of knowledge about support

Several of the men discussed how a lack of visible support for male survivors in their local area prevented them from seeking help. Participant 10, whose FTP experiences were one part of a range of abuse he experienced from his female partner, explained; 'you know I had nowhere to go, and you know there's no, I know for a fact there's no shelters or anything round me, nowhere I could literally leave to escape so I was essentially trapped there'. Participant 16 explained how when he tried to seek help from a local support service for victims of domestic abuse, he was presumably accidentally cc'd into an email from the service about not supporting him because he was a man:

The local charities that feed into local social services, are supporting women so there's no upcycle then to support male victims of domestic violence, which is why you get internal emails like 'this bloke's been pestering us, can we just ignore him?' which you know, if you're desperately trying to get out, is horrific.

Participants shared their concerns that if they sought help from professionals, they would not be appropriately supported because they were men. They were worried that services were not familiar with supporting male victims and were much more comfortable supporting women. This was illustrated by Participant 16, who explained:

Every agency cannot deal with men being abused and trying to protect themselves and their children. They're not set up for it, their practitioners are not well educated, and the systems are not in place to protect people, they're just not. They're non-existent.

More specifically, some men were particularly concerned about the gender dimensions of their experiences, having been abused by female perpetrators, and the additional challenge this poses when help-seeking. For example, Participant 6 noted, 'The problem is that it's more getting society to . . . to be more balanced and believe that women can do horrendous things to men'. Similar

sentiments were echoed by Participant 17 who said, ‘All I see now is erm women can never be perpetrators and men are always perpetrators’.

Other participants did not know where to go for help and support and were not aware that a few specialist services existed to support male survivors. As Participant 30 explained; ‘I mean I wasn’t aware that these people existed until I was in contact with you’.

And there’s no-one you can talk to about it, there’s no-one you can go to about it, because . . . this doesn’t happen to men (Participant 12).

Discussion

Heteronormative gender discourses and barriers to disclosure

Several of the barriers raised by participants during their interviews have been recognised to varying extents within existing research that has explored the experiences of male survivors of sexual violence. For example, the impacts of feelings of shame and self-blame, the role of masculine gender norms and stereotypes, and some of the practical barriers to disclosure (see, for example, Widanaralalage et al., 2022 within the context of male-on-male rape). However, the findings presented here highlight the importance of recognising, understanding, and responding to these barriers *specifically* within the context of FTP cases, where the perpetrator is a woman. In particular, the specific gendered dimensions that exist within these cases, as explained by participants, and the challenges they pose need to be recognised. Indeed, underpinning several of the barriers experienced by participants were specific gendered dimensions associated with the perpetrator being female and, the victim being male. The power and pervasive nature of these heteronormative gender roles and expectations must not be overlooked. As Hlavka (2017) notes; ‘Dominant discourses position men as sexual aggressors and women as sexual victims; to envision men as victims or women as perpetrators challenges dominant paradigms of sexual harm and risk, particularly in a heteronormative culture’ (p. 483). These discourses make it particularly difficult for male victims/survivors to disclose their experiences and to seek help. Indeed, the involvement specifically of a female perpetrator in FTP cases, produces ‘Further stigmatization against, or suspicion of the male victim because men are perceived as more sexually assertive, more sexually oriented, and more likely to initiate sexual activity’ (Fisher and Pina, 2013: 59).

Recognising, understanding, and appropriately responding to the specific heteronormative gender discourses which both act as, and underpin, barriers to disclosure in FTP cases are particularly important when considered within the broader context of contemporary research and public policy which predominantly focuses on violence *against* women and girls (VAWG), and often overlooks violence *perpetrated* by women, as well as sexual violence and abuse experienced by men. For example, the government’s *Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy* (Home Office, 2021) covers all victims of crimes that fall within the VAWG remit, for example, sexual violence, domestic abuse, honour-based crimes, and so on. Thus, when men are victims/survivors of sexual abuse, they are victims of crimes considered to be VAWG. This is explicitly mentioned by the Home Office in the titles of their policy papers on supporting male victims; *Position Statement on Male Victims of crimes considered in the cross-Government Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy* and *the Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan* (HM Government, 2019, 2022). Despite calls for the creation of a separate strategy focusing on violence against men and boys which would allow their unique and gendered needs and experiences to be reflected (see, for example, Men and

Boys Coalition, n.d.; Victims Commissioner, 2021), the government has instead published two position statements (HM Government, 2019, 2022) about supporting men and boys. The most recent of these has been widely criticised, including by the Victim's Commissioner (2022) at the time, who described it as 'devoid of ambition' and 'disappointing in the extreme'. She also noted that 'its confused and contradictory language is at risk of actively promoting the very harmful stereotyping the document cautions against' (Victims Commissioner, 2022).

Specifically for male FTP victims/survivors, the current policy approach of framing their experiences at the hands of a *female perpetrator* as a VAWG crime is particularly problematic. It undermines their experiences, while simultaneously reinforcing the heteronormative gender discourses which act as barriers to disclosure and help-seeking for many male victims/survivors. However, as the findings from this research highlight, it is the very opposite that is needed for male FTP victims/survivors to support disclosure and help-seeking. Thus, when considering how to dismantle barriers to disclosure and help-seeking for male FTP victims/survivors associated with heteronormative gender discourses, to be effective this must be done within the context of recognising and addressing the broader public policy and societal narratives that are relevant. Indeed, several participants were acutely aware of the broader public policy and societal focus on VAWG, and were concerned about its detrimental impact on male victims/survivors.

Addressing practical barriers to support experienced by male FTP victims/survivors

As noted by Hammond et al. (2017), disclosure and help-seeking by male survivors can be impacted by 'the severe lack of public information on male sexual assault and rape available within the public realm and, relatedly, the lack of appropriate support services available to male victims' (p. 138). Indeed, the Government's own *End-to-End Rape Review* has evidenced that many victims-survivors 'do not receive consistent or appropriate support' (HM Government, 2021: 7). While this statement is made in general reference to all victims/survivors, it is clear that the more 'nuanced' a victims/survivor's experience, the less their needs are being met. This was evident in many participants' experiences, as discussed earlier, with men unaware of the existence of support services or how to access them, or concerned about the experience they would have following disclosure because they were men, and/or because the perpetrator was a woman. These concerns raised by male FTP survivors are perhaps unsurprising given the wider context within which experiences of sexual violence are understood and responded to; that is VAWG. Indeed, there are far fewer support services accessible to male victim/survivors; some services that advertise as supporting both men and women provide a more limited service to male victims/survivors than their female counterparts; and specific understanding of FTP cases remains embryonic, both within support services, as well as for the wider public.

Despite the existence of these barriers, participants who did access support, particularly from specialist male-specific support services, highlighted the positive impacts it had on their health and wellbeing. Thus, it is imperative that both male-specific and gender inclusive support services are appropriately resourced to ensure their accessibility for all male victims/survivors (Widanaralalage et al., 2022: 1165). More specifically, however, it is also important that these support services are as accessible as possible, *specifically* for male FTP victims/survivors. This is true even for specialist male-specific support services, who may have more experience engaging with male survivors of *male* perpetrated sexual violence. As noted earlier, the gender dimensions of FTP cases where

female perpetrators are involved are of particular concern to male victims/survivors and this could be directly addressed with explicit reference made to such cases on support service websites, and in support materials. Services could actively encourage men to come forward to seek help and disclose their experiences with overt discussion of this form of sexual abuse, and explicit recognition that women can and do commit sexual abuse against men.

Labelling and the law as a barrier to disclosure

Labelling of their experiences was relevant to some participants' lack of disclosure and help-seeking. This is significant, because as noted by Donne et al. (2018), 'labelling a sexual experience as one that was unwanted, coerced, or forced may be a starting point for disclosing experiences of sexual violence victimization and accessing services' (p. 195). Moreover, within the context of disclosure the labels used may impact understandings and perceptions of the act of sexual violence being discussed (Sasson and Paul, 2014: 37–38). As noted earlier, several participants raised concerns about the consequences of disclosing their FTP experience, and in particular were worried about not being believed, or their experience being minimised or 'laughed off'. Thus, it is clear that the use of appropriate language and labels in relation to FTP cases is essential to supporting disclosure.

To this extent, some participants noted the role of the law in relation to labelling their FTP experiences. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the potential role and importance of fair labelling in law for victims of crime has been recognised (Chalmers and Leverick, 2008: 235–236). Within the context of FTP cases, under existing UK laws FTP cases are not legally recognised as rape, instead being criminalised under different sexual offences. For example, in England and Wales these cases would be prosecuted under the SOA (2003), section 4(4); causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent. Section 4 'is one of the more complicated provisions within the SOA 2003 because it creates two separate offences . . . : one involving non-penetrative sexual activity and the other involving penetrative sexual activity' (Weare, 2020: 2). The penetrative offence captures a range of sexual activity including;

where a victim is forced to carry out a sexual act involving their own person, such as masturbation, [where they are forced to] engage in sexual activity with a third party who may be willing or not, or [where they are forced to] engage in sexual activity with the offender, e.g., a woman forces a man to penetrate her (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022).

The complexity of the current legal response to FTP cases had the consequence that several participants were unaware of how their experiences would be criminalised, if at all, under the law. For some men, this made it more difficult for them to label their experiences. For other participants, there was a clear disconnect and inconsistency between how they would label their FTP experience – rape – and how the law does so, making the process of disclosure and help-seeking more difficult. Findings from this study therefore indicate that the exclusion of men's FTP experiences from the legal definition of rape, and/or the use of complex offences which incorporate a range of sexual offending within them (e.g. SOA, 2003, section 4), can act as barriers to disclosure and help-seeking. This is something that must be considered further within the context of potential law reform, encouraging disclosure, and continuing to improve access to support for male victims/survivors.

Concluding thoughts

The research findings presented here share for the first time the specific barriers to disclosure and help-seeking faced by male FTP victims/survivors in the UK. As with any empirical research, there are limitations to this study and the data collected. The sample size was relatively small and was purposive rather than representative in nature, with participants self-describing as having been FTP a woman. Nevertheless, in-depth qualitative data were gathered, with this being the first study in the UK to interview male FTP victims/survivors about their experiences. As such, this data provides the only contemporary insights into barriers to disclosure and help-seeking faced by male FTP victims/survivors in the UK.

During their interviews, participants shared multiple barriers which resulted in delayed, selective, or limited disclosure, or no disclosure at all. These included masculinity, feelings of shame and self-blame, struggling to understand and label their experiences, concerns about the consequences of disclosure, and a lack of (knowledge about) support. While many of these barriers have been acknowledged to varying extents within existing literature as being relevant to both male and female victims/survivors, this article has positioned them specifically within the context of FTP cases and has highlighted particular nuances that exist for this group of male victims/survivors. Given the well-documented potential benefits of disclosure and help-seeking for victims/survivors, the need to address these barriers is clear. While the broader contexts within which these barriers exist and are reinforced are more challenging to address, those working directly with male victims/survivors are better equipped to begin actively working to encourage men to step forward, disclose, and seek support. This could be, for example, via outreach work, which within the context of FTP cases, 'may be most effective if it directly targets stereotypes around who can be [victimized] and acknowledges how both proscribed and internalized masculinity norms influence acknowledgment and help-seeking' (Donne et al., 2018: 198).

The issue of FTP cases and understanding of men's experiences of this form of sexual violence remains embryonic. More research is needed to maximise knowledge and understanding and to develop a larger evidence base from which policy and practice can be developed. In the meantime, those working with male victims/survivors should be aware of the barriers faced by men who are FTP women, and actively work to address them to encourage men to step forward and realise the potential benefits of disclosure and help-seeking.

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