

REPORTING ON RAPE: **CHANGING THE NARRATIVE**



INTRODUCTION

Despite increasing awareness of men's violence against women, sexual violence continues at an alarming scale: more than 1 in 4 women report being raped or sexually assaulted as an adult. But fewer than 3 in 100 rapes reported to the police result in a conviction.

The viral spread of **#MeToo** in 2017 was hailed as a watershed moment for women's rights, but rape myths remain deeply embedded in our collective psyche.

The impacts of this stretch far and wide, determining whether victims report to the police or not, whether they access support services, or whether their cases result in a conviction.

The role of the media

How the media reports on violence against women and girls has real life consequences – shaping our collective attitudes and beliefs about this violence.

Poor journalism reinforces victim-blaming, harmful stereotypes, and attitudes that tolerate and normalise rape. But good journalism can help tackle these attitudes and drive change.

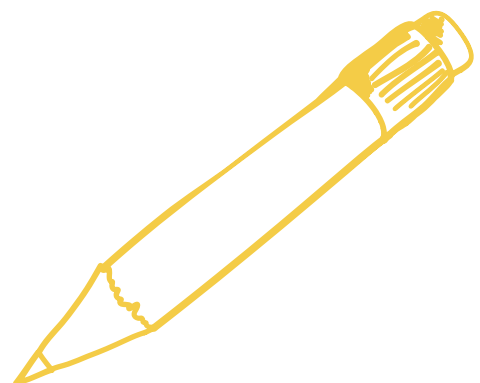
How can this resource help?

With the rise of misogynistic influencers and a worrying regression in young people's attitudes towards rape, responsible reporting is more important than ever.

Journalists are facing multiple pressures – balancing the demands of a 24-hour news cycle, pressure to drive high engagement, meeting standards of conduct and sensitivity to victims, journalistic ethics and integrity, and more.

Bringing together analysis of 12 years of media reporting on rape, this resource is designed to help you recognise some of the most common rape myths in the media and guide you in reporting on rape responsibly.

**END
VIOLENCE
AGAINST
WOMEN**



Problem #1: The myth of 'real rape' persists

What is rape?

Broadly, the law defines rape as when someone intentionally puts their penis in another person's vagina, anus or mouth, without the other person's consent, or without reasonably believing that they consent.

Legally, a person must have the freedom and capacity to consent to sex.

There are many instances in which a person cannot consent to sex. These include:

- ▶ They are asleep, unconscious, drunk, drugged or on drugs.
- ▶ They are pressured, manipulated, tricked or scared into saying 'yes'.
- ▶ They are too young or vulnerable to be able to make that choice.

However, mainstream media narratives are not representative of the reality of rape.

Most rapists know their victim

Contrary to common depictions of rape in popular culture, in British law, the definition of rape does not include additional physical violence, and most victims know the perpetrator.

- ▶ Almost half of all rapes of women are perpetrated by their partner or ex-partner
- ▶ In 85% of all rapes of women, the victim knows the perpetrator
- ▶ More than 1 in 5 victims were unconscious or asleep when they were raped

Yet media reporting of rape continues to reinforce the 'violent stranger' myth.

Analysis of reporting on rape shows the media wrongly makes a strong association between rape, violence and death, which is helping to fuel these myths.

MURDER	KILLING	TORTURE	MUTILATION
BASHING	STABBING	BEATING	STRANGLING
THROTTLING	MAIMING	BATTERING	BURNING
SHOOTING	SUFFOCATING	BRUTALISATION	CHOKING

If the media were to report on rape in line with the evidence, it would paint a very different picture; one that accurately shows the vast majority of victims know the perpetrator, and often does not involve additional physical violence.

Why is this important?

These myths mean victims may not immediately understand that what happened to them was rape, meaning they will not **access the support and justice they are entitled to**.

They can also impact the way the criminal justice system understands rape and impact which victims are taken seriously.

Problem #2: Women's credibility is the new short skirt

Women rarely lie about rape

False allegations are exceptionally rare. Myths that state otherwise have no basis in reality.

What the evidence tells us

According to the Crown Prosecution Service, just **0.6%** of reports are false allegations.

When victims withdraw from a prosecution, this is normally due to fears of the criminal justice process, lengthy delays to their case, poor treatment from police and prosecutors, and wanting to move on.

FEWER THAN ONE IN SIX victims of rape or assault by penetration report the crime to the police.

Women are more likely to **NOT REPORT RAPE** than to make a false report.

In the year-ending September 2023, just **2.9%** of recorded rapes resulted in a conviction.

The vast majority of men reported to the police for rape **WON'T GO TO PRISON.**

Media distortion

Despite being extremely rare, false accusations are over-represented in the news, skewing public perception. We see narratives like this in the headlines:

Jilted girlfriend who cried rape is jailed

JAIL ALL RAPE LIARS

JAIL OVER "RAPE" CLAIMS

The false rape allegation myth distorts the entire narrative of rape stories, turning them into battles of credibility, when in fact women rarely lie about rape.

She alleges, he denies

The press normally frames women's words as **allegations**, while men simply **deny**. This linguistic bias influences how rape stories are perceived, focusing on proving her truth rather than his innocence.

Alleged is also one of the words most commonly used by the media when describing rape. It implies scepticism and mistrust towards the women reporting this crime. In contrast, **deny** accurately describes a perpetrator's statement without passing judgement.

Despite the word **report** carrying the same neutrality without compromising any legal requirement to avoid prosecution for libel, this word is not often used to present women's accounts.

Alleged, adj.

That is claimed or asserted without proof, or pending proof.

Deny, v.

To contradict (anything stated or alleged); to declare to be untrue or untenable.

Report, v.

To give an account of (a fact, event, etc); to relate, recount, tell; to describe.

The press also frequently uses **alleged victims** or **alleged incidents**; expressions that directly question whether the event actually happened.

An alleged incident which is said to have taken place on March 19

During the alleged incident, she claimed Ronaldo fell to his knees

Police said earlier in the day that the alleged victims were bound with ropes and chains

This difference means that women's words are presented as unproven and possibly false, as **alleged** wrongly stresses a woman's perceived motivation to lie.

Compare:

The room in the Premier Inn near Rhyl where the rape was **alleged** to have occurred

The room in the Premier Inn near Rhyl where the rape was **reported** to have occurred

This is happening while sex offenders' motivation to lie to avoid prosecution is removed from the frame, and their words are reported as **denials** that don't need to be substantiated by facts.

Instead, these denials are often reinforced with descriptions of **how strongly – vehemently, vigorously, strenuously** – men accused of rape deny the accusations.

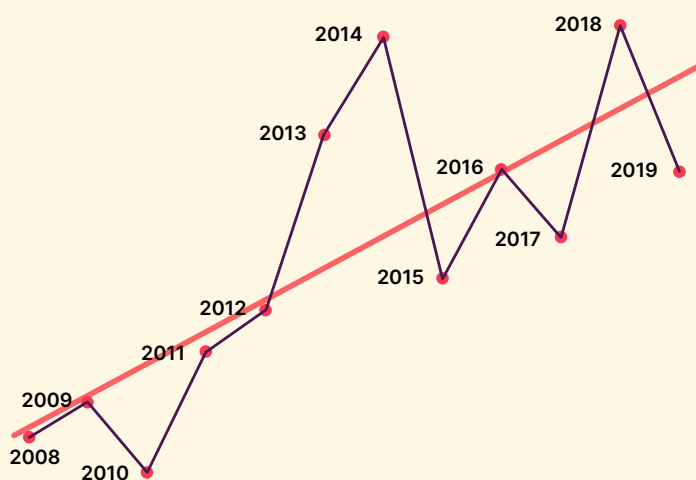
Historical shift

Alleged wasn't always a stable feature of rape discourse in the British press. Before 2012, it was less common in rape reports, primarily referring to non-sexual crimes like fraud. After 2012, its use in relation to rape surged, as shown here.¹

This shift is linked to two key changes:

- ▶ Overt victim-blaming has become less socially acceptable. The subtler myth that women lie about rape has replaced it, despite false allegations being exceptionally rare. With **alleged**, the press constructs a sense of 'fairness' for perpetrators without having to overtly blame victims.
- ▶ From 2012 onwards, the press has focused more on celebrity perpetrators, with the most reported cases involving a powerful man with the means to sue for defamation. These men's victims tend to be more easily disbelieved due to myths about why women report rape, when in reality there is no financial gain to be made from the criminal justice system, and in pursuing a conviction the odds are stacked against survivors, who are also frequently harmed by the process.

'Alleged rape'
in the British press
(2008-2019)



Why is this important?

Information from the small number of cases that gain media coverage is likely to be particularly influential in shaping **the public's understanding of rape**. Use of language and choice of cases to cover is currently deeply unequal, skewing society's perceptions of rape and fuelling harmful, sexist myths about who should be believed and why.

¹ Findings from statistical analysis of language, looking at the frequent co-occurrence of 'rape' with other words ('collocates') each year between 2008 and 2019.

Problem #3: A hierarchy of victims and perpetrators

The way **alleged** is used in the press demonstrates that the status of a perpetrator affects how he will be presented in the media.

In news reports about rape involving celebrities, **alleged** conceals a sense of **himpathy** for rich and famous men. But not all perpetrators are treated the same way.

Himpathy

The excessive sympathy sometimes shown towards male perpetrators of sexual violence

Kate Manne, 2017

Rising stars

High profile singers, actors and athletes often receive preferential treatment in the press, with their actions downplayed as mere **wrongdoing** or **misconduct**, and a focus on their **successful careers**.

Rugby stars' rape trial

Top flight footballer was 17 at time of alleged incident

Former boxing champion Victor Ortiz has been charged with rape

The defendant would never be in the dock were he not Britain's longest-serving soap star

The women involved in these cases are often scrutinised for their behaviour, with descriptions such as 'flirting' or 'teasing' commonly used despite this being irrelevant. These women are also more likely to be described as **alleged victims**.

Fallen stars

Some celebrities, especially if they do not fit the stereotype of the wasted talent, and are older, or in financial decline, are treated as exceptional cases of rogue men who perpetrate violence.

Saville, one of the most serious
predatory paedophiles in
criminal history

The disgraced Hollywood
producer Harvey Weinstein

Sex pervert Jeffrey Epstein

These men's crimes are not seen as an issue of the system they operate in – a system that protects them – but as an issue linked to their 'deviance', with narratives that wrongly assert that if they are removed, the problem is removed, with no need for substantial or systemic change.

"Deviant" men

Analysis of media reporting on rape shows that Black men or other marginalised men are wrongly categorised as 'ideal perpetrators', when in reality, rape is perpetrated by men of all backgrounds.

Compare, for example, how trafficking networks involving male perpetrators of minoritised backgrounds are represented in comparison with those involving rich, white perpetrators.

Compare:

Prosecutors must probe Jeffrey
Epstein's trafficking network

Four members of a notorious
Rochdale grooming gang
have still not been deported

Inequalities among victims

In cases of rape or sexual assault where the victim is murdered, Black and minoritised women receive less media attention than white women, despite being statistically more likely to be victims.

By determining whose cases receive public attention, this racial bias influences collective attitudes to what victims look like – impacting minoritised women's access to protection, support and justice.

Compare:



When sexual violence against minoritised women is covered, it often focuses narrowly on cases of so-called 'honour'-based abuse. This imbalance in reporting Black and minoritised victims' stories reflects and reinforces racist stereotypes about minoritised communities.

In the same way, geographically distant cases are also frequently represented in the UK media as examples of exceptional aberration and violence. Here, the wider cultural context is presented as unique and is critiqued in a way that is not applied to domestic cases.

Why is this important?

Not all perpetrators are treated equally: **wealthy, powerful white men tend to be afforded greater 'himpathy', impacting how victims are treated**. Perpetrators are regarded as individual 'deviants', removed from the contexts and systems that enable sexual violence – limiting our collective ability to understand its root causes and in turn, how best to tackle it. **The lack of attention given to Black and minoritised victims plays a role in upholding barriers to justice and protection.**

Solution #1: Shifting our language

The words we use have power. Avoiding harmful tropes and clichés can help move us closer to a society where rape and sexual violence is no longer tolerated.

- ▶ Instead of **alleged rape**, use **reported rape** or **disclosed rape**
- ▶ Instead of **alleged victim**, use **woman/girl** or **victim**.
- ▶ Instead of **she alleges**, use **she reports**
- ▶ Instead of **allegations**, use **her account** or **report**
- ▶ Instead of **allegedly**, use **reportedly**
- ▶ Instead of **incident** or **wrongdoing**, use **reported rape** or **sexual offence**
- ▶ Instead of **star**, **ace** or **champion**, use a **neutral description of the perpetrator's profession** or **just their name**
- ▶ Instead of using words like **vehemently**, **categorically** or **absolutely** to emphasise a perpetrator's denial, **present his words as just one account of what happened**
- ▶ **Don't invisibilise the perpetrator** by using gender-neutral language or the passive voice when not necessary
- ▶ Avoid using quotes to give **unnecessary or sensationalist details** about the case (e.g. impact on the perpetrator's reputation)
- ▶ Instead of racially loaded words like **gang**, use **network** or **group**

Journalism operates within wider social structures that put men in a position of power in relation to women and girls. While not prescriptive, using the above as a guide for reflecting on the language we use will help challenge tolerance of sexual violence as well as myths and stereotypes about victims and perpetrators.

Solution #2: Changing the narrative

Changing the words we use is an important first step. But to see real change in media reporting on rape, we need to see further change to broader narratives about this violence.

It is **never** 'his word against hers'

- ▶ Rape is rooted in gender inequality and the male power and control this produces, which is why the vast majority of victims are women and girls.
- ▶ Reporting of rape cases should never be presented as one person's word against another, where the odds of truth or lie are 50/50, because the vast majority of reported rapes are true.
- ▶ Given most perpetrators are known to the victim, and rape is often perpetrated as part of a pattern of coercive control and abuse, framing rape as a dispute about consent hides the power dynamics and unequal relationships at play, and the social systems that enable it. It also sets victims up for failure, given there are often no witnesses.
- ▶ Fairness in rape cases is not about treating victims and perpetrators in the same way, but factoring in real-world power differences.

Consider your sources

- ▶ When stories are heavily sourced from police or court reports, journalists can inadvertently end up repeating (and therefore reinforcing) the myths that stop survivors accessing justice. It is crucial to critically interrogate the statements and assumptions made in these sources, using this resource as a guide. This means recognising and choosing not to reproduce rape myths when they are mobilised in court, for example in the perpetrator's defence.
- ▶ Avoid disproportionate focus on the perpetrator's defence. Centring survivor voice and including analysis from the expert organisations that support them is crucial to exposing and challenging the rape myths that permeate the justice system and our culture at large.

CONCLUSION

Information from the small number of cases that gain media coverage is likely to be particularly influential in shaping **the public's understanding** of rape.

This in turn impacts whether **victims** will understand that what happened to them was rape or sexual assault, and whether they will come forward to report it and access support.

It also influences **the police, prosecutors, lawyers, judges and members of juries** who may well revert to the narrow definitions and misleading representations so persistently visible in the media when responding to women's reports of rape.

Challenging these myths is essential if we are to help survivors access support, increase rape convictions and tackle the societal attitudes that underpin this violence. **Journalists can play a crucial role in ending and preventing sexual violence!**



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This resource is a summary of Alessia Tranchese's research analysing twelve years of rape coverage in the British press – the first ever longitudinal study of the language used by the British press to talk about rape. **Read more here.**

More information

For more information and advice on language, framing or any aspect of reporting on rape, contact the End Violence Against Women Coalition by emailing media@evaw.org.uk

If you want to see and support good reporting on gender-based violence, check out the **Write to End Violence Against Women Awards**.

Support

Rape Crisis England & Wales' 24/7 Rape & Sexual Abuse Support Line is open 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Anyone affected by sexual violence can call free on **0808 500 2222** or **[talk online](#)**.

For further practical guidance on reporting on sexual violence, including signposting victims to helplines, responsible choice of imagery, and centring victims' voices, please see **Zero Tolerance's Media Guidelines**

Resource created with support from the **End Violence Against Women Coalition**

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