

Experiences of men forced-to-penetrate women
in the UK: Context, consequences, and engagement
with the criminal justice system

Executive Summary

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Overview

This report is based on a collaborative research study conducted in partnership between Lancaster University Law School and Survivors Manchester from May 2018 to July 2019.

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Context

The term 'forced-to-penetrate' (FTP) is used for cases where a man is forced-to-penetrate a woman's vagina, anus, or mouth with his penis, and without his consent.¹ This terminology is used because the existing legal definitions of rape within the UK all exclude FTP cases.² They are instead prosecuted under alternative sexual offences, for example in England and Wales under the Sexual Offences Act 2003, section 4; causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent.

This report summarises the experiences of men who have self-identified as having been FTP women.³ This is an under-discussed and under-researched form of sexual violence, with only one previous research study having explored the issue in the UK.⁴ The findings presented in this report improve understandings of the context, complexities, and consequences of being FTP for male survivors, providing clearer insights into men's lived experiences, and allowing recommendations to be made to practitioners and policy-makers.

Research questions

This study sought to address four fundamental questions:

1. What are the contexts within which men's FTP cases take place?
2. What are the consequences for men who are FTP women?
3. Which agencies and organisations are men engaging with regarding their experiences?
4. How do men's experiences and perceptions of the law and criminal justice system enhance or constrain reporting and engagement with criminal justice agencies?

In order to respond to these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 men who self-identified as having been FTP a woman. Participants were able to choose whether they wanted to be interviewed face-to-face at Survivors Manchester's premises, or via telephone or Skype. The interview schedule was intentionally kept broad so that the diversity of participants' experiences could be captured through their own words. The length of the interviews varied considerably (between approximately 30 and 120 minutes), depending on how much detail participants chose to disclose about their experiences. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then thematically analysed by the researchers.

Ethical approval for the research study was gained from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Management School Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University.

¹Siobhan 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' (2018) *International Journal of Law in Context* 14, 1, 110, 110

²For the legal definition of rape in Scotland, see *Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009*, section 1; for Northern Ireland, see *Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008*, Article 5.

³It is also possible for men to be forced-to-penetrate other men, however this research project focused solely on cases involving female perpetrators and male victims.

⁴Siobhan Weare, 'Forced-to-penetrate cases: Lived experiences of men – Baseline research findings' (2017, Survivors Manchester / Lancaster University). Available at: http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/87216/7/Forced_to_Penetrate_Cases_Lived_Experiences_of_Men_Project_Report.pdf

Key findings

- Participants most frequently reported that the perpetrator was their female partner or ex-partner, and that their forced-to-penetrate experiences were one element of domestic abuse and/or post-separation abuse that they experienced.
- Participants frequently reported being repeatedly victimised. This took a number of forms including: childhood sexual abuse; repeated instances of compelled penetration by the same perpetrator; and varying types of sexual violence from multiple different perpetrators (both male and female).
- Being forced-to-penetrate a woman had substantial negative impacts on men's mental health, emotional well-being, and personal lives and relationships. These impacts included depression; PTSD; suicidal ideation and attempts; feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame; difficulties in forming relationships; and sexual issues/dysfunction.
- When participants engaged with organisations and services, they were most frequently health-related, for example GPs. However, they did not always disclose their forced-to-penetrate experience(s) as being the reason behind their engagement.
- Specialist male sexual and domestic violence services are important and had a positive impact on those participants who accessed them. However, not all participants were aware of their existence, or were able to access them.
- Men often took several years to disclose their experience(s) to anyone.
- There were numerous barriers to men disclosing and engaging with organisations and services. These included: fear of not being believed; feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame; lack of knowledge about, and availability of, specialist male sexual and domestic violence support services; and gender expectations around masculinity.
- The majority of participants did not report to the police. Of those that did report the vast majority had negative experiences with the police.
- Participants had overwhelmingly negative perceptions of the police, criminal justice system, and the law. Concerns were raised around: bias against men; disbelief they can be victims of female perpetrated sexual and domestic violence; and inequality of treatment as victims under sexual offences law.
- Reform of the sexual offences legislation was important to participants to ensure male survivors' experiences are appropriately acknowledged and labelled. Suggestions were put forward for law reform, including redefining rape to include forced-to-penetrate cases.
- The majority of participants labelled their forced-to-penetrate experiences as rape, even though this is not reflected in the current law.

Recommendations

Drawing on the experiences of participants shared in this report, eight key recommendations are made for improving responses to male FTP victims, as well as male victims of female perpetrated sexual and domestic violence more generally.

1. Societal awareness and understanding of forced-to-penetrate cases and female-on-male sexual violence must improve.

Many participants felt isolated and unable to discuss their FTP experiences because of the silence that exists around this form of sexual violence. Compelled penetration and other forms of female perpetrated sexual violence are rarely discussed in society and thus there is a lack of awareness and understanding of men's experiences. The silence around this issue is further reinforced by powerful and pervasive gender and sex stereotypes around men and masculinity, which are left unchallenged by a failure to discuss them. The overall result is often a sense of disbelief that men can experience serious sexual violence from women, and that even if they do, the impacts on them are minimal or non-existent. The findings presented in this report highlight the importance of raising awareness of female-on-male sexual violence and FTP cases.

Awareness can be raised in multiple ways, for example; through responsible press reporting of female-on-male sexual violence, incorporating explorations of this form of sexual violence within soap and drama storylines, and creating space within which men's stories can be told and voices heard, e. g. through art and drama performances. In raising societal awareness of men's FTP experiences the aim is not, and should not be, to detract attention from, or undermine, the experiences of other sexual violence survivors (regardless of gender), but instead should allow for the recognition of FTP cases as a specific, gendered, form of sexual violence.

2. When men disclose that they are victims of domestic violence to any organisations or services, they should be routinely asked whether they have also experienced sexual violence within the relationship.

From the stories of men who had experienced FTP within the context of domestic abuse, it was clear that many of them had not disclosed the sexual violence they were experiencing. They often found their FTP experiences amongst the most difficult to discuss. By asking men if they have experienced any sexual violence within the relationship, it makes clear to them that organisations and services acknowledge that men can be victimised by women in this way. This is important in combating some of the negative perceptions that men may have about not being believed and the system being biased against men, and provides a direct opportunity for men to disclose.

3. All services and organisations that are likely to engage with forced-to-penetrate victims need training on this form of sexual violence to enable them to respond appropriately and positively to male victims.

Participants reported that being FTP a woman often had substantial and long-lasting negative impacts on their mental and emotional well-being, as well as on their personal lives. Men engaged with a range of organisations and services, mostly for support, including GPs, counsellors, and therapists. These services, and others, e. g. A&E departments, social workers, CAFCASS, the Family Court etc. , need to be aware of this form of sexual violence and the impacts it can have. Training should recognise the diversity of men's experiences (as illustrated in this report), and enable services to respond appropriately and positively. This training should directly address pervasive gender stereotypes that staff may have around masculinity, sex roles, and sexual and domestic violence.

Services and organisations need to be aware that men can experience this (and other) forms of sexual violence from women, and be open to discussing this with men who disclose, as well as those who do not. For example, several participants noted that they had gone to their GP for support in dealing with the impacts of their FTP experience(s), but had not disclosed what happened to them. GPs should be confident in probing more into why men may be experiencing the mental health problems they have come in to discuss, and respond appropriately if they disclose the sexual violence they have experienced. Appropriate responses include signposting to specialist male domestic and sexual violence services.

4. Specialist male sexual and domestic violence support services need to be better funded and signposted across the country.

Participants who accessed specialist services were clear about their importance and benefits. Unfortunately, not all men were aware that such services existed, or there were no such services in their geographical area. Signposting to specialist male services needs to be improved. This can be done by the services themselves, as well as by other organisations that male victims may engage with, for example GPs, the police, and other health-related organisations. Alongside this, provision of these specialist services needs to be improved so that all men can access them, regardless of where they live. This requires appropriate funding to ensure that:

1. These services exist, and
2. That they can deliver a high-quality service to male survivors without extensive waiting lists.

As highlighted in this report, men can take years to disclose the abuse they have experienced. When they gather the courage to disclose and attempt to access support, they should not have to travel outside of their geographic area, or sit on a waiting list for months. They should be able to access high-quality specialist services almost immediately.

5. All organisations that could engage with male forced-to-penetrate victims need to be aware of barriers to men's engagement and actively work to dismantle these barriers.

There were multiple and complex barriers that prevented men from engaging with services, organisations, and the police. All organisations (including health services, the police, family courts, social services etc) who could engage with male FTP victims need to recognise these barriers and work to understand them. They also need to actively work to dismantle them in order to maximise men's engagement. There are numerous ways this could be done, for example:

- Explicitly acknowledging in publicly available printed materials that men being FTP/ experiencing sexual violence from women can, and does happen.
- Being inclusive of female-to-male sexual violence in the language and examples used in (publicly available) organisational policies and documents.
- Including female-to-male sexual violence as part of mandatory staff training and making this publicly known so that male victims are aware of staff knowledge in this area.

6. Police responses to male victims of domestic and sexual violence need to improve. All police forces should be trained about forced-to-penetrate cases.

The participants who engaged with the police reported negative experiences on the whole. This, combined with the negative perceptions that were reported about the police and criminal justice system, highlights the need for police forces to improve their responses to male victims of domestic and sexual violence perpetrated by women. As part of improving this response all forces should be trained about FTP cases to understand the experiences of male victims. A number of suggested improvements were also identified by participants. These included:

- Officers being aware of the gender and sex role stereotypes they may hold and not letting these affect their practices.
- Creating a supportive and safe environment for men when they report so that they feel as if they are believed, as well as actually being believed. As part of this, specially trained sexual and domestic violence officers should be routinely reminded that victims and perpetrators can be of any sex and be clear on how to respond appropriately and positively in instances of female-to-male violence being disclosed.
- Not making assumptions around men's disclosures, for example that because they are victims of a female perpetrator, they would rather report to a male officer. Provide men with choices and listen to them.
- Improving communication with survivors. This relates to keeping men up-to-date with their cases, but also to communication between forces, e. g. where the victim has reported to one force, but the crime took place in the geographical location of another.
- Signposting men to male specific sexual and domestic violence support services, or if these are not available in the area, to other appropriate sources of support.

As part of improving their responses to male victims of female-perpetrated sexual violence, forces could also regularly acknowledge that this occurs, e. g. through poster/ social media campaigns, as well as ensuring that their websites and publicly available policies use inclusive language and examples when addressing domestic and sexual violence. This will give men increased confidence in coming forward and reporting their experiences.

7. Reforming the law of rape to include forced-to-penetrate cases should be considered.

Participants were aware that the current legal definition of rape excludes FTP cases. This is because the legal definition in section 1 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 requires penile penetration of the victim's anus, vagina, or mouth by the perpetrator. Therefore, only men can be recognised as principal offenders of rape (women can be secondary offenders, i.e. accomplices). Participants were not, however, aware that what they experienced was criminalised under section 4 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003; causing a person to engage in sexual activity without consent. As discussed at the beginning of the report, this is a very different offence with a different sentencing regime (see section 1. 1). Suggestions for law reform were put forward by participants, including redefining rape to include FTP cases. When participants were asked how they labelled their FTP cases, the most frequently used label was 'rape'. There is therefore a clear disconnect between how male FTP victims label their experiences, and how the law does so.

The importance of appropriately labelling experiences of sexual violence within the criminal law is well-recognised, and therefore serious consideration needs to be given to reforming the law of rape to incorporate FTP cases. There are multiple ways this could be done, including the introduction of a completely gender-neutral definition of rape, or the introduction of a new offence of rape by compelled penetration which specifically covers FTP cases. There are likely to be challenges associated with any law reform approach and therefore further research in this area, and consultation with relevant stakeholders is needed.

8. An Ending Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys Strategy should be introduced that sits alongside the existing Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

Participants had overwhelmingly negative perceptions of the criminal justice system and the law. They felt that the justice system and police were biased against men, and that in particular there was no clear recognition that men could be victims of domestic and sexual abuse at the hands of a female perpetrator. There were also concerns that by talking about their experiences or labelling them a certain way, participants would be detracting from the experiences of female victims of sexual and domestic violence, something which was not their aim. There is currently (and rightly) a Home Office Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy⁵ which provides an overview of the actions being taken by government agencies on tackling VAWG. Male victims of crimes are also considered within this strategy, specifically male victims of sexual, domestic, and honour-based violence and abuse. Whilst the Home Office recently published a 'Position statement on male victims of crimes considered in the cross-Government strategy on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls',⁶ this still does not result in the VAWG strategy adequately addressing the experiences of male victims. Incorporating the experiences of men and boys, historically almost as a footnote or add-on, within the VAWG strategy risks the experiences of male victims being overlooked or minimised.

Creating a separate strategy for men and boys would directly address some of the concerns raised by male participants in this study around bias against, and disbelief of, men's experiences of sexual and domestic violence within the criminal justice system. It would also support, reflect, and underpin the other recommendations called for in this report. By calling for the creation of an Ending Intimate Violence Against Men and Boys Strategy, we are adding the evidence presented in this report, and our voice, to those that have already done so, including the former Victims' Commissioner Baroness Newlove⁷ and the Men and Boys Coalition.⁸

⁵Home Office, 'Ending Violence against Women and Girls 2016-2020: Strategy Refresh' (Home Office, 2019). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/783596/VAWG_Strategy_Refresh_Web_Accessible.pdf

⁶Home Office, 'Position statement on male victims of crimes considered in the cross-Government strategy on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls' (Home Office, 2019). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/783996/Male_Victims_Position_Paper_Web_Accessible.pdf

⁷Baroness Newlove, 'Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales' response to the 'Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse' government consultation' (Victims' Commissioner, N.D.) Available at: <https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/victimscmm-prod-storage-clhgxum05k1/uploads/2018/06/VC-response-to-DA-con-doc.pdf> 12-13

⁸Men and Boys Coalition, 'Victims' Commissioner makes landmark call for strategy to support male victims following submissions from MBC' (MBC, N.D.). Available at: <http://www.menandboyscoalition.org.uk/newsevents/victims-commissioner-makes-landmark-call-for-strategy-to-support-male-victims-following-submissions-from-mbc/>

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Survivors Manchester is a survivor-led/ survivor-run voluntary organisation that aims to create and facilitate a safe space for male survivors of sexual abuse and rape to work through personal and sometimes painful issues. Their work is concentrated on empowering men to make their own positive life choices and begin their own unique journey of healing. Survivors Manchester work ethically and adhere to working within the BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

For more information please visit

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