

Disclosing sexual abuse: an exploration into why female victims do not report

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Abstract

This research explores the complex interplay of psychological, cultural, and systemic factors influencing victims' experiences of sexual violence, with a focus on delayed reporting, non-reporting, and withdrawal of complaints. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates qualitative and quantitative data to provide a nuanced understanding of victim behaviour and societal trends. The findings highlight the pervasive impact of victim-blaming attitudes, cultural and religious pressures, and systemic barriers within the criminal justice system, which collectively deter survivors from seeking justice.

Victim blaming, rooted in psychological constructs such as the "just-world hypothesis," perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces societal tendencies to scrutinise victims rather than hold perpetrators accountable. Cultural and religious norms, particularly those prioritising family honour, further silence victims, creating environments where abuse is normalised. Systemic barriers, including court delays, invasive disclosure practices, and insensitive interactions with law enforcement, exacerbate survivors' feelings of alienation and mistrust. These factors contribute to alarmingly high attrition rates, with half of reported sexual offences in the UK failing to proceed to prosecution.

The study's findings underscore the urgent need for systemic reform. Recommendations include implementing trauma-informed practices, reducing court delays, and eliminating disproportionate evidence requests. Public education campaigns targeting rape myths and promoting survivor-centred approaches are essential to fostering empathy and dismantling cultural stigmas. Additionally, cross-sector collaboration between advocacy groups, community leaders, and criminal justice institutions is vital for addressing cultural and systemic barriers.

This research aims to contribute to a more just and compassionate response to sexual violence by centring survivors' experiences and prioritising empathy and equity. The study calls for a paradigm shift in societal attitudes and institutional practices, emphasising the necessity of holistic and sustained efforts to support survivors and enhance justice outcomes.

Keywords: *Sexual Violence, Underreporting, Systemic Barriers, Trauma Informed Practices*

Introduction

Sexual violence represents a global crisis with significant societal and individual consequences. Despite widespread recognition of its prevalence, it remains one of the most underreported crimes, particularly in patriarchal and traditional societies. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 35% of women worldwide experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime, yet fewer than 10% of incidents are formally reported (WHO, 2022). These statistics reveal both the extent of the issue and the deep-rooted barriers that prevent many survivors from seeking justice.

In the United Kingdom, the pattern of underreporting reflects global trends. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), more than 83% of sexual violence cases in England and Wales are not reported each year (ONS, 2022). Even when cases are reported, the outcomes remain deeply discouraging. Recent government data shows that fewer than 2% of reported sexual offences lead to a successful prosecution (Gov.uk, 2021). This gap between victimisation and justice points to widespread failures within the criminal justice system.

A range of psychological, societal, and institutional factors influence decisions not to report. Survivors may experience memory loss linked to trauma, fear of being blamed, or anxiety about facing aggressive questioning or disbelief. These concerns are often reinforced by negative social attitudes, such as the belief that victims provoke violence or lie about their experiences (Herman, 1992). For marginalised groups, including migrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, and ethnic minorities, these challenges are made worse by cultural taboos, racism, and other forms of discrimination (Heron et al., 2022).

This article examines the barriers that prevent women from reporting sexual abuse or continuing through legal processes once a complaint is made. It draws on theories such as strain theory and feminist criminology to explore how trauma, social norms, and institutional failures shape survivors' experiences. It also evaluates recent reforms, including Operation Soteria, a Home Office initiative designed to improve police responses to rape and serious sexual offences. The programme aims to shift the focus of investigations away from scrutinising victims and towards examining offender behaviour. It promotes evidence-based practice, trauma-informed interviewing, and improved collaboration between police and specialist services. Initial evaluations of Operation Soteria have found some improvements in police practice, such as more respectful treatment of survivors and better case progression. However, results have also shown major inconsistencies across different police forces and concerns about whether changes are sustainable in the long term (Home Office, 2023).

This study uses a thematic analysis of secondary sources, including institutional reviews, survivor testimony, and published data, to understand why women do not report or later withdraw complaints. It identifies the combined effects of social stigma, cultural expectations, and institutional processes that often discourage disclosure. The article concludes with recommendations for improving the justice system, including trauma-informed training, fairer investigatory procedures, stronger support for survivors, and better public education. By understanding and addressing the factors that silence survivors, society can begin to build a more just and compassionate response to sexual violence.

Literature review

Victim blaming

Victim blaming, a deeply ingrained societal issue, shifts accountability from perpetrators to victims, perpetuating inequality and obstructing justice. Rooted in historical gender biases and reinforced by cultural narratives, this phenomenon undermines survivors' healing by implying they are partially or wholly responsible for their victimisation (UK Council for Internet Safety, 2023). Such narratives exacerbate

societal perceptions of justice, creating an environment where survivors are often met with scepticism rather than support.

Psychological Underpinnings of Victim Blaming

Lerner's (1980) "just-world hypothesis" posits that victim blaming arises from the human desire to believe in a fair and predictable world. Individuals shield themselves from the unsettling reality that harm can occur randomly by attributing responsibility to victims. Experiments such as those by Lerner (1966) demonstrate how individuals rationalise victims' suffering to reconcile their inability to intervene. Hamby (2016) corroborates this, arguing that such attribution provides psychological security by reinforcing the illusion of control. Similarly, societal advice often disproportionately targets potential victims, suggesting behavioural changes like "how to avoid being attacked," which shifts focus away from addressing perpetrator accountability (Savani et al., 2011; Snyder et al., 2018).

Victim Blaming and Rape Culture

Victim blaming intersects with rape culture, a societal framework that normalises male aggression and trivialises survivors' experiences (Buchwald et al., 1993). Rape myths, including those about victims' clothing, alcohol consumption, or previous relationships, serve to excuse perpetrators while undermining victims' credibility (Grubb & Turner, 2012). These narratives align with Von Hentig's (1948) controversial theory of victim precipitation, suggesting that victims may provoke or facilitate their victimisation. Amir's (1967) concept of "victim-precipitated rape" further entrenched harmful attitudes, blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator and reinforcing societal scepticism toward survivors.

Research highlights how pervasive rape culture discourages reporting and contributes to secondary victimisation within legal and social systems. Survivors often face judgement based on rape myths, with studies showing these biases influence not only societal attitudes but also professional responses, including law enforcement and judicial proceedings (Brownmiller, 1993; Edwards et al., 2011).

Consequences and Pathways Forward

The consequences of victim blaming extend beyond individual survivors, fostering societal apathy toward systemic injustice. Survivors internalise blame, experiencing guilt, shame, and fear, which often deter them from reporting crimes or seeking support (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Campbell et al., 1997). Niemi and Young (2015) identify that moral frameworks also influence blame attribution, with individuals prioritising group cohesion more likely to blame victims than those emphasising fairness and harm prevention. This creates a cycle of silence and impunity, where perpetrators are emboldened, and survivors are alienated.

Efforts to address victim-blaming must focus on both systemic reforms and cultural shifts. Public education campaigns, such as those led by Rape Crisis (2023) and End Violence Against Women (2022), work to dismantle rape myths and promote empathy and survivor-centred narratives. Within the criminal justice system, adopting trauma-informed practices can mitigate re-traumatisation and foster trust between survivors and institutions (Sloan et al., 2021). Initiatives like these must be paired with rigorous training for law enforcement and legal professionals to ensure that responses are free from bias and informed by an understanding of trauma and victim psychology (Venema, 2016).

Cultural change is equally vital. Advocacy groups and community leaders should work collaboratively to dismantle harmful norms, fostering environments where survivors feel empowered to seek justice. This aligns with recommendations from Jay (2021) and the Truth Project (2021), which advocate for integrating cultural sensitivity with accountability measures. A shift in focus from victim behaviour to perpetrator accountability is essential to addressing entrenched societal biases and achieving justice for survivors (Hamby, 2016; Snyder et al., 2018). By prioritising empathy, equity, and systemic change, society can challenge the foundations of victim blaming and foster a justice system that supports survivors rather than alienating them. These efforts require sustained commitment, but they are essential steps toward a more equitable and compassionate society.

Re-Traumatisation

Re-traumatisation, the recurrence of trauma symptoms triggered by experiences that replicate or echo the original trauma, remains a significant obstacle for survivors of sexual violence. This phenomenon, particularly pronounced within the criminal justice system, often intensifies survivors' psychological distress through procedural demands that fail to account for their emotional vulnerabilities. Danieli (2010) emphasises that re-traumatisation occurs when present traumatic exposure amplifies or mirrors previous experiences, underscoring the urgency of understanding and mitigating its effects.

The neurobiological underpinnings of trauma play a central role in re-traumatisation. Rossi (2008) describes "state-dependent re-triggering," whereby sensory or situational cues, such as recounting traumatic events during investigations or trials, force survivors to relive their past trauma. This is compounded by dysregulation in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which governs the body's stress responses. Research by Nutt (2000) highlights that survivors of sexual violence often experience heightened stress responses, flashbacks, and nightmares, driven by this physiological dysregulation. These effects are further exacerbated by cognitive processes, as Koss (2004) explains, with mental defeat, avoidance, and confusion amplifying the severity of trauma symptoms, particularly when survivors perceive a lack of understanding or support.

Within the criminal justice system, survivors frequently encounter practices that inadvertently perpetuate re-traumatisation. The procedural requirement to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences, often under adversarial questioning, leaves many survivors reliving their trauma in environments that lack sensitivity and empathy. Baird (2022) critiques the invasive nature of evidence collection, particularly the disproportionate emphasis on victims' credibility by disclosing unrelated personal details, such as therapy notes. This scrutiny reinforces feelings of vulnerability and mistrust, further alienating survivors from a system meant to support them. Moreover, Cromer et al. (2006) found that trauma responses are not confined to direct recounting of abuse. Even discussions of seemingly unrelated sensitive topics, such as self-esteem or life circumstances, can trigger distressing memories, revealing how deeply embedded trauma triggers are in survivors' psychological and emotional states. The absence of trauma-informed practices exacerbates these issues, with Follette and Duckworth (2012) highlighting institutional insensitivity as a catalyst for re-traumatisation.

The systemic implications of re-traumatisation extend beyond survivors to the professionals supporting them. Therapists, advocates, and law enforcement personnel often experience "vicarious trauma," a concept described by McCann and Pearlman (1990) as the emotional toll of being repeatedly exposed to survivors' narratives. This not only impacts the mental health of professionals but also risks diminishing the quality of care and support provided to survivors. Newell and MacNeil (2010) emphasise the need for institutions to address vicarious trauma through adequate support systems, ensuring professionals can maintain their effectiveness without compromising their well-being. To mitigate re-traumatisation, systemic reforms are essential, beginning with the adoption of trauma-informed practices at every stage of the criminal justice process. Sensitive interviewing techniques that minimise repetitive questioning and adopt an empathetic approach can significantly reduce harm. Ellison and Munro (2017) argue that such techniques alleviate survivors' distress and improve the accuracy and reliability of the evidence gathered. Additionally, reducing the reliance on invasive evidence collection, as Baird (2022) recommended, would shift the focus away from excessive scrutiny of survivors and towards building more substantial cases against perpetrators. This would ensure that investigative processes are proportionate, respectful, and justice-centred.

Educational initiatives are equally critical in fostering a more supportive environment for survivors. Comprehensive training programs for law enforcement, legal professionals, and advocates can increase awareness of trauma's effects, enabling these professionals to respond more empathetically and effectively (Sloan et al., 2021). By addressing biases and misconceptions, such training also challenges societal attitudes that perpetuate victim blaming and disbelief. Institutions must also prioritise the well-being of professionals to mitigate the ripple effects of vicarious trauma. Peer support networks, counselling services, and opportunities for professional development can help build resilience among those working closely with survivors, as Newell and MacNeil (2010) suggested. Strengthening these supports is vital to creating a sustainable and compassionate framework for addressing sexual violence.

Beyond institutional reforms, public education campaigns are needed to challenge cultural norms perpetuating re-traumatisation. Rape myths, victim blaming, and societal scepticism towards survivors create an environment where trauma is continuously reinforced. Campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the

psychological and neurobiological effects of trauma can foster a more empathetic societal response. Rape Crisis (2023) emphasises the importance of dismantling these stigmas to empower survivors and build trust in systems of support. A reformed criminal justice system must prioritise survivors' psychological and emotional well-being without compromising the pursuit of justice. By embedding trauma-informed practices, providing comprehensive training for professionals, and fostering cultural change, institutions can reduce the prevalence of re-traumatisation and restore faith in justice processes. These reforms are essential for survivors and building a society that genuinely values compassion, equity, and accountability.

Culture and Religion

The intersection of culture, religion, and victimisation highlights the dual role that religious and cultural norms play in shaping how societies respond to sexual violence. In some cases, religious belief systems promote compassion and prosocial behaviour. In others, they create conditions that silence victims, excuse abuse, and protect perpetrators from accountability (Ellison, 1992). A deeper understanding is needed of how cultural and religious structures both protect and harm, and how these frameworks contribute to cycles of silence, control, and victim blaming.

Religiosity has long been viewed as a social control mechanism. Hirschi and Stark (1969) argued that religious commitment encourages self-control and moral behaviour by reinforcing authority and internalised discipline. Ellison (1992) extended this view by linking religious involvement to prosocial values like kindness and community care. However, these perspectives often fail to acknowledge the power that institutions hold, or how that power can reinforce gender inequality, marginalisation, and abuse. In some settings, institutional religiosity has protected abusers and promoted silence, especially where abuse is reframed as a private or spiritual matter rather than a criminal one.

Hierarchical religious interpretations often idealise male authority and female submission. In doing so, they create environments where women are discouraged from reporting abuse and may even be led to believe that such abuse is part of their expected role. Scriptural readings that call for women to obey or submit to their husbands, as discussed by Prine and Schatz-Stevens (2020), can lead to internalised guilt and silence. These ideas are not only taught within some religious institutions but

also reinforced through cultural norms that value family reputation over personal safety.

Honour-based violence is a particularly harmful expression of this dynamic. It refers to practices that aim to control individuals, especially women, whose behaviour is seen as dishonourable or shameful. These practices may include emotional pressure, physical punishment, forced marriage, and in extreme cases, disappearance or murder. Data from the Crown Prosecution Service (2020) shows that hundreds of such cases are recorded each year, although many go unreported. The murders of Banaz Mahmod (2006) and Shafiea Ahmed (2003) are among the most well-known examples in the UK. In both cases, victims had attempted to seek help but were not believed or adequately protected. These tragedies demonstrate the consequences of institutional inaction in the face of cultural and religious justifications for violence.

Institutional responses have sometimes reinforced the silence. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA), which ran from 2014 to 2022, examined how institutions in England and Wales responded to reports of child sexual abuse. It focused on a wide range of settings, including religious organisations (such as the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and Orthodox Jewish communities), local authorities, care homes, schools, the police, and the armed forces. The inquiry found widespread failures. These included covering up abuse, prioritising the reputation of institutions over child protection, and failing to act on credible allegations. Religious settings were identified as particularly resistant to external oversight and often placed moral or spiritual interpretations above safeguarding responsibilities (IICSA, 2022).

The Truth Project, which formed part of IICSA, provided a space for adult survivors to share their experiences of abuse. Running from 2015 to 2022, it received accounts from over 6,000 participants. Many described being abused by clergy, teachers, care workers, or family members, and facing disbelief or punishment when they tried to disclose what had happened. The findings revealed that survivors were often blamed, silenced, or ignored. They also showed how abuse was frequently enabled by institutional cultures that discouraged questioning and promoted secrecy. Although the Truth Project offered validation for many survivors and helped shape IICSA's recommendations, critics have noted that some of its core proposals, such as mandatory reporting, have not yet been fully adopted or enforced.

Cultural and religious narratives often merge to create environments where survivors are blamed, and perpetrators are shielded. Patriarchal beliefs frame victims as having brought abuse upon themselves, especially when their behaviour is seen as deviating from gendered expectations. This contributes to underreporting and leads to further cycles of harm. Hamby (2016) argues that institutional victim blaming is often used to preserve group identity and cohesion, even when it comes at the expense of justice or safety.

Addressing these challenges requires community-led and system-wide interventions. Community leaders, religious authorities, and survivor advocates need to work together to challenge harmful teachings and to promote accountability. Trauma-informed education campaigns are essential to shift attitudes, particularly in communities where family honour or religious identity are prioritised over individual wellbeing. Ellison and Munro (2017) argue that education plays a critical role in reshaping beliefs and promoting empathy, and it must be paired with visible institutional reform.

Religious organisations must commit to greater transparency and external oversight. Survivors should have clear and supported routes to report abuse without fear of retaliation or exclusion. Partnerships with independent organisations, such as victim support services or safeguarding charities, can help ensure that institutional allegiances do not override the need for justice. The Truth Project made clear that many survivors felt isolated within their own communities, and that outside support was essential to recovery.

Finally, public education campaigns should focus on challenging harmful norms and raising awareness of the real consequences of honour-based violence and institutional silence. These efforts must go beyond individual awareness and focus on reshaping the systems that protect abusers. A survivor-centred approach, rooted in empathy, fairness, and accountability, can help ensure that cultural and religious values do not become excuses for violence.

Understanding Non-Reporting and Delay in Sexual Abuse Disclosures

Many women who experience sexual abuse do not report it, or delay reporting until much later. This decision is shaped by psychological trauma, social stigma, and failures within the legal system. Survivors face a complex web of barriers that

discourage disclosure, including fear of judgment, disbelief, and the risk of further harm through the reporting process itself. These issues are often worse when the perpetrator is a family member or intimate partner, making the emotional and practical consequences of disclosure even more difficult to manage.

Survivors often internalise feelings of shame, guilt, or confusion. In many cases, they struggle to define their experience as abuse—particularly when the relationship involves trust, affection, or dependence. Research by Layman (1996) found that women who had close relationships with their perpetrators were less likely to label their experiences as rape, which delayed their ability to seek help. These reactions are shaped by social expectations that discourage women from disrupting family stability or confronting male authority, especially in traditional or religious communities. Abuse by a partner differs significantly from abuse by a stranger. It often follows a cycle of abuse, which includes a pattern of tension-building, violence, reconciliation, and calm. Over time, this cycle can erode a victim's self-worth and sense of agency. Survivors may minimise the violence, believe it is their fault, or hope that the situation will improve. This dynamic, known as traumatic bonding, leads some victims to stay in abusive relationships and avoid seeking help, even when they are at risk (Dutton & Painter, 1981). The emotional connection to the abuser, combined with practical concerns about housing, finances, or children, further discourages reporting.

Psychological and biological responses to trauma can also delay or prevent disclosure. Survivors often experience confusion, memory gaps, and intense emotional distress, which make it difficult to recall events clearly or to speak about them confidently. Tolin and Foa (2006) describe how trauma affects the brain's stress response systems, impairing survivors' ability to process their experiences and increasing their vulnerability to guilt and self-doubt.

Society also plays a powerful role in discouraging survivors from reporting. Rape myths, such as the belief that women provoke assault through their appearance or behaviour, remain widespread. These beliefs are reinforced by media portrayals that question victims' credibility and suggest that women lie about sexual violence. Such messages lead many survivors to expect judgment, not support. Randall (2010) notes that the legal system often demands that survivors conform to narrow expectations—such as showing physical resistance or immediate distress—to be believed. Survivors who do not match these expectations are often doubted or dismissed.

These problems are made worse by structural inequalities and insensitive policing practices. Women from minoritised backgrounds, including migrants and women of colour, often face additional barriers such as racism, language difficulties, or distrust of state institutions. Heron et al. (2022) highlight that institutional discrimination can compound trauma and leave survivors feeling unwelcome or unsafe when they try to access services.

Within the criminal justice system, survivors often encounter disbelief, delay, and a focus on their own actions rather than the behaviour of the perpetrator. Venema (2016) and Maddox et al. (2012) found that some officers judge the credibility of survivors before gathering full evidence. Survivors are frequently asked to recount their experience multiple times, and may be required to provide personal records, including therapy notes or messages, to prove their reliability. These procedures can cause secondary victimisation—a term used to describe the emotional harm caused by the very systems meant to support survivors (Campbell, 1997).

These experiences discourage many survivors from coming forward at all. Others may report the offence but later withdraw from the process due to stress, mistrust, or re-traumatisation. Corrigan (2013) and Tashjian et al. (2016) show that many survivors perceive the justice system as hostile and feel unsupported throughout the process.

Improving disclosure rates requires more than encouraging survivors to speak up. It requires systemic reform. Police and legal professionals must receive training in trauma-informed practice. Survivors need consistent access to advocacy, legal advice, and emotional support. Public education campaigns must challenge damaging myths and shift the focus away from questioning victims and towards holding perpetrators accountable. These changes are essential to creating a system where survivors feel safe, respected, and believed.

Why Do Female Victims Withdraw Their Complaints?

The decision to withdraw from the criminal justice process after reporting sexual violence is complex and often shaped by a combination of psychological distress, relational dynamics, cultural pressures, and institutional failings. Withdrawal can occur at various stages, including retracting a formal statement, declining to attend court, or disengaging entirely from the legal process (Barnish, 2004). While the choice remains

personal, it is frequently influenced by external conditions that make continued participation feel unsafe, overwhelming, or futile.

Court delays and the slow pace of legal proceedings are among the most cited reasons for withdrawal. The Home Office (2021) reported that one in two rape victims withdrew from the criminal justice process in 2021. This trend continued into 2022, with 40% of victims choosing to disengage. On average, survivors waited 354 days from reporting to charge and a further 353 days to trial conclusion—nearly two years in total (Ministry of Justice, 2022). During this period, many survivors reported emotional exhaustion, frustration, and a loss of hope. As one survivor told inspectors, “It had been adjourned four times over four years, leaving me to regret it all” (HMIC, 2020).

The psychological impact of prolonged legal involvement can be severe. The process often requires repeated recounting of the incident, lengthy exposure to distressing legal proceedings, and cross-examination that scrutinises a survivor’s credibility, history, and behaviour. This contributes to what Campbell (1997) termed “secondary victimisation,” where the legal process itself becomes a source of trauma. Billingham (2022) further argues that this prolonged re-engagement with trauma impedes survivors’ emotional recovery, leaving them psychologically tethered to the original incident for extended periods.

Another barrier is the demand for intrusive evidence, particularly requests for therapy notes, medical records, or personal communications. Many survivors report feeling pressured to comply, fearing that refusal could harm their credibility. A survey by the Metropolitan Police (2019) found that 58% of victims withdrew because they were uncomfortable with these disclosure demands. Baird (2022) and Dines (2023) have described these practices as institutional overreach, where scrutiny of victims is prioritised over investigation of perpetrators. Edwards (2023) similarly argues that such demands reinforce victim-blaming and undermine trust in the system.

These structural issues are particularly damaging for survivors of domestic or relational abuse, where the dynamics of power, fear, and dependency further complicate the legal process. The concept of traumatic bonding (Dutton & Painter, 1981) helps explain why survivors may feel emotionally connected to or protective of their abuser. Robinson and Cook (2006) found that 27% of survivors withdrew after reconciling with their perpetrator, and 14% expressed discomfort with punitive approaches, preferring support-based interventions. For many, continuing with

prosecution would mean confronting not only the perpetrator but also broader relational consequences, including family breakdown, financial instability, or community backlash.

Cultural and social pressures can also lead to withdrawal. In honour-based contexts, victims may be expected to remain silent to protect the family's reputation. The Truth Project (2021) documented survivors who experienced community ostracism or coercion after engaging with the justice system. These pressures often reflect deeply rooted patriarchal norms, where women's credibility is tied to family or community standing, and abuse is concealed to avoid public shame.

Structural inequality within the criminal justice system compounds these problems. Survivors from minoritised or marginalised groups may experience racism, language barriers, or a lack of culturally competent support. BMC Women's Health (2021) found that negative interactions with law enforcement, such as being dismissed, judged, or stereotyped, further alienate survivors. One participant recalled being told by an officer that she was "too fat to be raped," a statement that illustrates the extent of institutional bias and harm.

These cumulative experiences often result in a profound loss of trust in the justice system. Survivors who feel unsupported or disbelieved are more likely to disengage. According to the Office for National Statistics (2018), around half of all recorded sexual offences in the UK do not progress to court. Hohl and Stanko (2015) argue that fragmented and inconsistent responses across police and legal services erode confidence and further discourage victims from continuing with legal action.

Addressing these issues requires more than minor adjustments. Reducing court delays through streamlined case management is essential to prevent the emotional toll of prolonged proceedings (Victims' Commissioner, 2019). Trauma-informed practices must be embedded across all stages of the justice process—from first contact with police to trial—to reduce re-traumatisation and improve survivor experience (Campbell, 2008). Disclosure requests should be proportionate, transparent, and subject to independent oversight, ensuring that victims' privacy and dignity are protected (Centre for Women's Justice, 2021).

Public education campaigns are also critical. These should challenge rape myths, promote survivor-centred approaches, and counter cultural narratives that frame withdrawal as a sign of dishonesty or weakness (Hamby, 2016). A system that respects survivors' autonomy, supports emotional safety, and demonstrates consistent

accountability is more likely to retain victim engagement and improve justice outcomes.

Improving retention in the justice process is not only about reducing attrition but about restoring faith in systems of protection. As Baird (2021) argues, this requires a national strategy that prioritises victims of violence against women and girls, backed by long-term investment in systemic reform. Survivors must feel that engaging with the justice system is safe, meaningful, and worthwhile, not another site of harm.

Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-methods design using secondary data to explore the complex factors influencing female survivors' decisions to delay reporting, not report, or withdraw complaints of sexual violence. The study combined qualitative and quantitative approaches with selected case study material to achieve a broad yet in-depth understanding of both individual experiences and wider systemic trends.

The qualitative component explored the emotional, relational, and cultural dimensions of victimisation. It focused on the “why” behind reporting behaviours, drawing on survivor narratives, interview transcripts, and inquiry reports to examine lived experiences (Osuala, 2007; Tewksbury, 2009). The quantitative component offered generalisable insights by analysing statistical data from sources such as the Office for National Statistics, Home Office reports, and institutional datasets (Polit & Beck, 2008). Additionally, selected case studies from published inquiries and institutional reviews—including the Truth Project and the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)—were included to provide contextual depth and illustrate the themes identified across the data.

Combining these three data sources—qualitative, quantitative, and case study—the research employed data triangulation, strengthening its credibility and interpretive validity (Flick, 2014). The triangulated design ensured patterns emerging from statistical data were understood in light of survivor experiences and grounded in real-world institutional responses.

All data used in this study were drawn from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed studies, policy reports, and publicly accessible investigations. This approach aligns with Wincup's (2017) argument that secondary qualitative research enables the exploration of sensitive topics without placing further emotional burden on vulnerable

populations. To manage data collection, Boolean search techniques were employed (Hollier, 2020), using terms such as “delayed reporting,” “sexual violence,” “victim withdrawal,” and “rape myths,” combined with logical operators like “AND,” “OR,” and “NOT.” Inclusion criteria focused on adult female survivors of sexual abuse and excluded data concerning male victims and child abuse cases, in line with ethical boundaries and the research scope (Blessing & Chakrabarti, 2009).

Data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework, which allowed for identification and interpretation of key themes such as victim blaming, re-traumatisation, police insensitivity, and cultural barriers. Sub-themes, including honour-based violence, relationship dynamics, and institutional withdrawal, revealed how structural and psychological factors interact to shape survivor responses. Thematic analysis was particularly effective in bridging quantitative trends with qualitative accounts, offering a flexible and iterative structure for interpreting diverse data sources (Daly & Gliksman, 1997).

Ethical compliance was ensured through a proportionate review process, which confirmed that no human subjects were contacted, and that all data were used under public access policies. Data were anonymised when necessary, and caution was taken to avoid misinterpreting sensitive material. As the topic involved exposure to traumatic content, vicarious trauma among researchers was mitigated through access to peer support, as recommended by McCann and Pearlman (1990).

The integration of methods in this study addressed the limitations of each approach. Qualitative data offered insight into emotion and meaning but lacked generalisability. Quantitative data revealed measurable patterns but provided limited understanding of context. Case study analysis illustrated how individual experiences intersect with institutional structures. Together, these methods produced a well-rounded and ethically sound framework for examining sexual violence and disclosure, offering both empirical rigour and survivor-centred interpretation.

Findings and discussion

This section presents the main findings of the research, organised thematically around the core issues identified: victim blaming and credibility, re-traumatisation through criminal justice processes, cultural and religious silencing, and withdrawal from the justice system. These findings were drawn from secondary analysis of

qualitative studies, statistical data, public inquiries, and institutional case studies. While many of the themes are well-documented in existing literature, this analysis draws on recent data and initiatives to explore how these barriers operate in practice and evaluates whether reforms have addressed them effectively.

1. Victim Credibility and Blame: Persistent Barriers to Justice

Victim blaming remains one of the most pervasive factors influencing whether survivors report sexual violence. Secondary analysis of case study data from IICSA (2022) and the Truth Project (2021) reveals repeated instances where survivors were disbelieved, questioned about their clothing or behaviour, or advised not to “ruin a man’s life” by proceeding with allegations. These findings are reinforced by data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2021), which shows that 63% of women who chose not to report sexual offences cited fear of not being believed or being blamed as a key factor.

Media narratives and police culture continue to reflect outdated assumptions about what a “real” victim looks like. The data also highlighted the persistence of informal “credibility thresholds,” especially among law enforcement, where victims were expected to show physical resistance or provide clear forensic evidence. While initiatives such as trauma-informed training programmes have been introduced in some forces, the inconsistent uptake and lack of independent oversight limit their overall effectiveness.

2. Re-Traumatisation within the Criminal Justice Process

A critical pattern across the data is that survivors often disengage due to re-traumatising experiences after reporting. According to the Ministry of Justice (2022), rape victims in England and Wales now wait an average of 706 days between reporting and trial conclusion. During this time, survivors must often recount their trauma multiple times and respond to invasive disclosure requests, such as therapy records or phone data. In a 2019 study by the Metropolitan Police, 58% of rape victims who withdrew their cases cited the intrusiveness of these demands.

Case material from HMICFRS (2021) reviews further shows that this burden is compounded by sceptical or dismissive treatment during interviews. One case

revealed that a survivor was asked, “What were you wearing?” during a formal interview, despite existing policy guidance discouraging such questions. While initiatives like *Operation Soteria* aim to shift focus away from victim credibility and towards offender behaviour, initial evaluations (Soteria Bluestone, 2023) highlight a lack of uniform application across forces and limited impact in reducing dropout rates.

3. Cultural and Religious Barriers: Honour, Silence, and Institutional Complicity

The influence of culture and religion on disclosure decisions was especially visible in case studies of honour-based violence. In the case of Banaz Mahmod (2006), repeated attempts to seek police help were dismissed despite clear warnings about threats to her life. Her murder was later used in policy reviews as evidence of institutional failure to understand honour-based abuse. Cultural pressure to protect family honour, religious doctrine emphasising female obedience, and fear of community ostracism combine to create significant reporting barriers.

Data from the Crown Prosecution Service (2020) shows that conviction rates in honour-based abuse cases remain disproportionately low, in part due to reluctance among victims to proceed. Meanwhile, findings from IICSA (2022) reveal how religious organisations—particularly the Catholic Church and the Church of England—prioritised institutional reputation over child protection. The Truth Project reports show that survivors from religious communities were often told that reporting abuse was “a sin” or that “God would deal with it.”

Despite growing awareness, few initiatives have addressed these specific cultural barriers. While survivor advocacy groups have developed community-based interventions, these efforts remain underfunded and often lack police or government backing. The lack of mandatory reporting and statutory safeguarding responsibilities in religious institutions further weakens protections.

4. Withdrawal from the Legal Process: Delay, Disengagement, and Disillusionment

Withdrawal after initial reporting was one of the most common outcomes across the data reviewed. In 2021, 40% of victims formally withdrew from the criminal justice process (Home Office, 2021). Case study evidence highlights prolonged delays,

repeated adjournments, and lack of communication as core reasons. For example, one survivor in an HMIC (2020) report described a four-year wait and multiple cancelled hearings before deciding not to continue.

Psychological data also indicates that prolonged legal involvement can lead to emotional burnout and a resurgence of trauma symptoms (Billingham, 2022). This is especially true for victims in domestic or familial contexts. The concept of *traumatic bonding* (Dutton & Painter, 1981) was relevant in multiple cases where victims reconciled with their abuser during proceedings. In Robinson and Cook's (2006) study, 27% of victims who withdrew cited renewed emotional ties as a factor.

Reform efforts to address this include improving case progression and reducing disclosure demands. However, recent inspections (HMICFRS, 2022) suggest that progress is inconsistent and often superficial. Without structural changes, such as specialist courts, legal advocacy, and faster case resolution, complaint withdrawal will likely remain widespread.

Summary of Key Themes and Implications

Across all thematic areas, this research found that while structural reform initiatives exist, their practical implementation remains uneven, unmonitored, or under-resourced. Victim-centred language and policy have become more common, but without cultural change and process reform, they risk becoming symbolic. The data also highlighted a lack of tailored support for minoritised victims, whose experiences are shaped not only by gendered violence but also by racism, cultural silencing, or immigration status.

Efforts such as Operation Soteria show promise in shifting investigatory focus, but evaluations highlight limited success in changing deep-rooted cultural attitudes. Similarly, while the Truth Project and IICSA exposed institutional harm, key recommendations—such as mandatory reporting and independent safeguarding in religious settings—remain only partially implemented.

Conclusion

This research has shown that the decision to report or withdraw from the criminal justice process is shaped not only by personal trauma but also by social narratives,

cultural expectations, and institutional failings. By analysing secondary data through a mixed-methods lens—including case study material, statistical trends, and survivor narratives—it offers an integrated view of the persistent barriers faced by female survivors of sexual violence in the UK.

Four intersecting themes emerged from the analysis: societal victim-blaming, re-traumatisation within the criminal justice process, the silencing power of cultural and religious norms, and the high rate of complaint withdrawal. While some reform initiatives have emerged, such as Operation Soteria and trauma-informed police training, their implementation remains inconsistent and often fails to address the root causes of attrition and silence.

This study contributes original insight by critically assessing the practical impact of recent initiatives and highlighting the need for systemic coherence in responding to survivors. It also emphasises the importance of cultural competence, streamlined procedures, and survivor-centred justice. Crucially, it reveals that progress requires more than revised procedures—it demands a shift in values, priorities, and public discourse.

Recommendations

1. Launch Sustained Public Education Campaigns

Introduce nationwide campaigns to dismantle rape myths and reduce societal victim-blaming. Campaigns should target communities, schools, media outlets, and institutions to challenge stereotypes and increase awareness of the realities of sexual violence and survivor experiences.

2. Embed Trauma-Informed Practices Across the Justice System

Require mandatory training in trauma-informed approaches for all professionals involved in sexual violence cases, from first response officers to judges. Training should focus on minimising re-traumatisation, supporting victim autonomy, and shifting investigative focus away from victim behaviour.

3. Strengthen Cultural and Religious Sensitivity with Safeguarding Oversight

Provide law enforcement and legal personnel with training on cultural and religious dynamics that affect disclosure, particularly in cases involving honour-

based abuse. These efforts must be paired with independent safeguarding mechanisms within religious institutions to ensure accountability.

4. Standardise Investigatory Procedures to Reduce Intrusiveness

Develop clear national guidelines on evidence requests, including thresholds for accessing therapy notes, medical records, and digital data. Survivors must be informed of their rights and the rationale behind requests, and independent oversight should monitor compliance.

5. Ensure Early Access to Legal and Advocacy Support

Guarantee access to independent legal advice and advocacy from the point of first disclosure. Advocates should support survivors through police interviews, evidence collection, and court preparation, reducing disengagement and emotional attrition.

6. Improve Data Collection and Transparency

Establish a national framework for collecting, analysing, and publishing data on disclosure rates, case progression, withdrawal, and outcomes. This data must be disaggregated by ethnicity, age, and case type to identify disparities and inform targeted reform.

Final Reflection

This research highlights the urgent need to re-centre survivors in every aspect of the criminal justice process. The persistence of disbelief, delay, and procedural harm signals a system unsuitable for purpose. A survivor-centred, culturally competent, and ethically sound justice framework is not only necessary for reducing violence but essential for restoring public confidence. These recommendations provide a route forward, but their success depends on political will, inter-agency cooperation, and sustained cultural change.

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