



Married or on a date: cultural norms and gender differences in rape perception in an Iranian sample

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ABSTRACT

This online experiment examined how Iranian women and men ($N = 525$; 321 women, 204 men) perceived a heterosexual rape encounter depending on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Participants read a vignette describing a non-consensual sexual encounter in which the victim and the perpetrator were either married or dating. They then indicated victim blame, certainty of rape judgement, and punishment attribution to the perpetrator. Women and men blamed the married victim more and were less likely to judge the marital encounter as rape, with larger differences between conditions for men than for women in exonerating the married perpetrator. Stronger honour and religious beliefs predicted more victim blaming, lower rape certainty judgements, and lower punishment, more so in marital rape than date rape. The discussion highlights the need to recognise rape in various victim-perpetrator scenarios beyond stranger rape and to address the societal context that condones and perpetuates sexual violence against women.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

Understanding the social perception of non-consensual sexual intercourse beyond the insights from Western cultures has significant implications for individual, societal, and institutional responses towards date and marital rape in Iran.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 September 2023
Revised 19 June 2024
Accepted 10 September 2024


KEYWORDS

Victim-perpetrator relationship; victim blame; honour culture; religious fundamentalism; Iran

Introduction

Rape victims often receive negative reactions from people such as from their social circles, their communities, healthcare professionals, and the justice system (see review by van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). When victims are blamed for sexual assault, they experience a “secondary victimisation” that can inflict further harm and compromise their recovery and wellbeing (Smith & Skinner, 2012). One of the factors that affect people’s judgements and reactions towards rape is the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (see review by Grubb & Harrower, 2008). While up to 80% of sexual assaults are committed by a perpetrator known to the victim (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 2024), research consistently demonstrated that victims are more frequently blamed when the victim and the perpetrator know each other, such as acquaintances/dates or

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2024.2418102>.

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intimate partners (see review by Grubb & Harrower, 2008). Whereas rape perception is a well-researched topic in Western societies (e.g. see review by van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), there is a lack of knowledge about how people perceive rape in Muslim societies, such as in Iran (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023). Such knowledge is needed, given that blaming rape victims for their plight can significantly undermine their recovery process, reduce their willingness to report, and affect the handling of rape cases in the criminal justice system (see review by Krahé, 2016).

Evidence shows that dominant sociocultural norms about gender and sexuality affect victim blaming and rape judgement in a society (Gravelin et al., 2019). The social context of Iran is characterised by numerous religious fundamentalist and honour norms (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023; Razavi et al., 2023) that affect gender norms and sexuality. After the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has become an Islamic state and has implemented its institutional structure – political, legal, economic, and societal – based on “Sharia” (Islamic law; Arjomand, 2004). Sharia has a strong influence on sexuality and has facilitated and promoted male sexual desire and gender hierarchy by implementing gender discriminatory laws and policies, such as compulsory head covering (“Hijab”), sex segregation in schools, public transport, and sports centres (Moghadam, 2013).

According to Iran’s rape law, only non-consensual intercourse forced by a stranger is criminalised (“Zena e ba Onf” or “Zena e ba Ekrah”). In other words, non-consensual sex within marriage is not legally recognised as rape (Islamic Penal Law, 2014), despite recent findings that among Iranian female victims, 40.4% reported sexual victimisation by an intimate partner, which represents the highest victimisation rate compared to other constellations, such as acquaintance or stranger assaults (Malayeri et al., 2022). Simultaneously, according to the Islamic Penal Law (2014), engaging in sex outside marriage, as in dating, is sinful for women and thus punishable.. However, despite this rule, dating and sexual activity have risen among Iranians over the last two decades (Motamedi et al., 2016). Yet, there remains a stigma attached to women who engage in extra-marital sex, which can contribute to condoning men’s sexually aggressive behaviours. Furthermore, underreported cases of rape are a global issue, and in Iran, gender-discriminatory rape laws further hinder the reporting of rape to the authorities (Shahali et al., 2016).

The present research examined how women and men in an Iranian sample perceived a rape incident depending on the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, either marriage or dating, and how perceptions varied in relation to the perceivers’ endorsement of honour culture and religious fundamentalism, two dominant socio-cultural norms in Iran.

Differences in the social perception of rape

Thus far, only a few studies have examined the impact of information about whether the perpetrator is an intimate partner versus a non-intimate partner on rape perception (see review by Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Jaffe et al., 2021). Yet, no study to our knowledge has investigated Iranian men’s and women’s perceptions of a marital rape encounter. Evidence from Western countries has shown that, compared to acquaintance/date rape, marital rape is less likely to be acknowledged as rape, and the married victim is often blamed more than the victim of an acquaintance/date rape (Ferro et al., 2008; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Monson et al., 2000). The misconceptions of “real rape” can play a major role in rape judgement and victim blaming (Krahé, 2016). The “real rape” stereotype defines specific criteria for a rape incident to be considered a “real rape” such as an attack perpetrated by a stranger, in a dark and secluded area, involving forced sexual intercourse with a victim who strongly resists (Hockett et al., 2016). Hence, the further a specific incident of non-consensual sex deviates from the “real rape” stereotype, the higher the likelihood of blaming the victim and minimising the severity of the rape encounter. Based on the “real rape” stereotype, victims of marital rape should be blamed more than victims of acquaintance/date rape.

Another important factor underlying the tendency to blame victims of marital rape is the concept of “implied sexual consent” in intimate relationships, where the history of sexual relations with the perpetrator reinforces the assumption of continuous consent for all upcoming sexual activities

(Shotland & Goodstein, 1992). As the sexual history increases, people tend not to require men to seek consent for sex. Furthermore, male observers are more likely to perceive sexual encounters as consensual (Humphreys, 2007). Findings from a U.S. study support this proposition, showing that both men and women were more inclined to blame a married victim than a victim on a date. The difference in rape perceptions (marriage vs. dating) was more pronounced among men (Monson et al., 2000). Therefore, this implied sexual consent in a marital relationship may make people less certain that the incident is rape, even when the non-consent was clearly communicated.

In terms of gender differences in rape perception more generally, men tend to blame victims more than women (Grubb & Harrower, 2008). This may be attributed to differences in identification with the perpetrator and the victim: men often identify more with the male perpetrator, while women lean towards identifying with the female victim (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). According to defensive attribution theory, women may blame the victim to feel less vulnerable, distancing themselves from the possibility of a similar fate (Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2020). However, other studies, including two from Iran, did not find gender differences in attributions of blame to female victims in acquaintance (date) rape scenarios (Bagherian et al., 2021; Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023). Hence, the question of gender differences in the tendency to blame a rape victim requires further investigation.

Based on the above, we hypothesised that, compared to a date rape scenario, people would be less likely to perceive marital rape as rape and would assign more blame to the married victim compared to the date rape victim. Also, men were predicted to blame the victim more, be less certain that the incident was rape, and be more responsive to the information about the victim-perpetrator relationship, so that the difference in their perceptions of the marital rape scenario as opposed to the date rape scenario would be greater compared to women.

Honour culture and religious fundamentalism

Honour culture is characterised by a set of beliefs, attitudes, and norms about the importance of personal reputation and can act as a socio-cultural potential risk factor for intimate partner violence (Gul et al., 2021). Honour norms entail gendered expectations – gendered honour codes – for both women and men to be honourable. According to gendered honour codes, men are expected to be strong, intolerant of disrespect, and able to defend their and their families' reputation against perceived threats (called "Qeirāt" for Iranian men; Razavi et al., 2023). Women are expected to preserve their sexual purity before marriage, exhibit loyalty, and show submission to their spouse and family members (called "Haya" for Iranian women; Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023).

This gendered honour code can justify violence against women when they engage in behaviours perceived as threatening their partner's honour (e.g. disobedience, infidelity, romantic rejection) or tarnishing their own honour through extramarital sex. In honour cultures, one of the most aggressive responses to a partner's disobedience is "marital rape", which is often condoned and exonerates the husband from being a perpetrator. This is driven by the importance of the family's and husband's honour, which is regarded as a matter of life or death (Vandello et al., 2009). On the other hand, date rape victims experience less blame for their plight compared to married victims. This is because a date rape primarily violates a woman's honour (purity), considered to be of lesser significance than family and men's honour (Canto et al., 2017).

Past research revealed that the more people held honour beliefs, the more they blamed female rape victims and accepted rape myths and sexist attitudes, although they also held more negative attitudes to rape (Ceylan-Batur & Uskul, 2022). In Iran, higher endorsement of honour codes was related to higher blame attribution to victims of sexual assault (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023).

In addition to honour norms, religious fundamentalism may be linked to perceptions of rape as a further set of beliefs that prescribe gender and sexual norms in society (Razavi et al., 2023). Religious fundamentalism describes the strict endorsement of the ideology that there is only one true set of

religious teachings and fundamental rules that are infallible. Studies showed a link between religious beliefs and higher rape victim blaming (Heath & Sperry, 2021). Moreover, as religious fundamentalist beliefs endorse a greater gender-based hierarchy by expecting women to be subordinate to men as authorities (Flood & Pease, 2009), it is more likely that individuals subscribing to religious fundamentalism would downplay rape that occurred between a perpetrator (a husband) with higher status and authority than the victim (the wife) in the relationship (Munsch & Willer, 2012).

The present research

This study examined how women and men in an Iranian sample perceived a heterosexual rape scenario depending on the relationship between the female victim and the male perpetrator. It further investigated the influence of socio-cultural norms of honour and religious fundamentalism on rape perception. Based on the theorising and empirical evidence summarised above, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Men, compared to women, will blame the victim more, will be less certain that the sexual encounter was rape, and will attribute a less severe punishment to the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 2: Compared to date rape, perceivers will blame the marital rape victim more, be less likely to judge the sexual encounter as rape, and will attribute a less severe punishment to the married perpetrator.

Hypothesis 3: The differences in attribution and judgement of date vs. marital rape will be larger among men than among women.

Hypothesis 4: The more perceivers endorse honour norms, the more they will blame the victim, the less certain they will be that the sexual encounter was rape, and the less severe the punishment they will assign to the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 5: The more perceivers endorse honour norms, the larger the differences in attributions and judgement of date versus marital rape.

Hypothesis 6: The more perceivers endorse religious fundamentalism, the more they will blame the victim, the less certain they will be that the sexual encounter was rape, and the less severe the punishment they will attribute to the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 7: The more perceivers endorse religious fundamentalism, the larger the differences in attributions and judgement of date versus marital rape.

Figure 1 displays the conceptual model of the hypotheses.

Materials and methods

Participants and design

A-priori power analyses revealed a required sample size of 489 participants to have 80% power to detect a small effect ($f = 0.15$) for MANOVA, ANOVA, and regression models (see Appendix A in the Online Supplementary Material for more details about the power analysis). Adult Iranian participants (18 years and older) were recruited via social media (e.g. Telegram, WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn). This approach reached a large potential audience as 79% of Iranians use the internet (The World Bank, 2021a) and most of them are connected on social media (United Nations, 2014). We introduced this online survey to participants as a study on the perception of social interactions and informed them that the survey would include a description of an unwanted sexual encounter between a woman and a man. At the end of the survey, participants could choose to enter a raffle for vouchers from an online Iranian store by accessing a separate survey link.

Out of 611 adult participants who completed the survey, 78 were excluded for providing incorrect answers on the manipulation check of the victim-perpetrator relationship, and a further eight participants were excluded due to reporting non-binary gender, precluding their inclusion in the

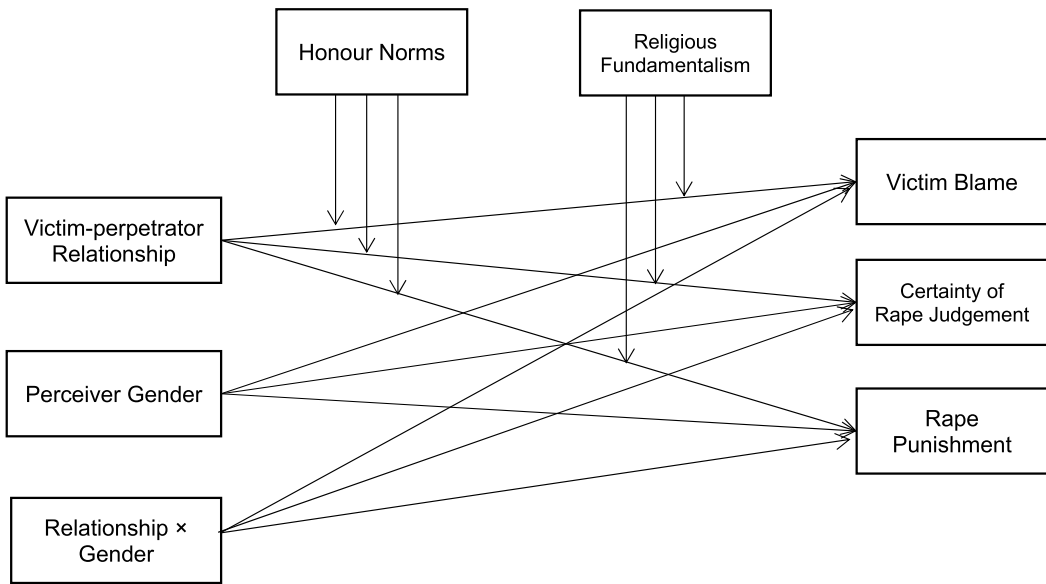


Figure 1. The conceptual model.

analysis. The final sample consisted of 525 participants (321 women, 204 men), with ages ranging from 18 to 70 years ($M = 32.74$, $SD = 7.56$; see Appendix B in the Online Supplementary Material for additional demographic information about the sample).

The experiment had a 2 (Perceiver Gender: woman vs. man) \times 2 (Victim-Perpetrator Relationship: marriage vs. dating) between-subjects design with three dependent variables: victim blame, certainty of rape judgement, and punishment attribution to the perpetrator. Endorsement of honour norms and religious fundamentalism were included as continuous moderators. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two scenarios that manipulated the victim-perpetrator relationship. Participants then read the respective rape scenario (adapted from Temkin & Krahé, 2008). In the dating condition, a man (named Amir) had non-consensual sex with his female date (named Bahar) at his place, after two months of seeing each other. They had not been sexually intimate before. In the marriage scenario, Amir and Bahar, married for two years, had a history of regular sexual intimacy. Amir and Bahar are common first names in Iran according to the National Civil Registration (IRAN News Network, 2020).

Measures

The study materials were presented in Farsi. The questionnaire was translated from English to Farsi by an Iranian native speaker fluent in English and then back translated into English by a native English speaker fluent in Farsi. Appendix C in the Online Supplementary Material displays the final survey in English and Farsi.

Victim blame

For the purposes of our study, victim blame was conceptualised to comprise two facets (a) the degree to which participants held the victim responsible and the degree to which they minimised the responsibility attributed to the perpetrator. To reflect these two facets, participants indicated the victim's and the perpetrator's responsibility on eight items (adapted from Bieneck & Krahé, 2011). The first four items referred to the responsibility attribution to the perpetrator (e.g. "To what extent do you think Amir is responsible for the situation?", "How much do you think Amir is

to blame for what happened?”). The remaining four items referred to the responsibility attribution to the victim (e.g. “To what extent do you think that Bahar had control over the situation?”, “How likely is it that Bahar could have avoided the situation?”). The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all/very unlikely*) to 7 (*very much so/very likely*). A confirmatory factor analysis established that after reverse-scoring the items of perpetrator responsibility, the eight items formed a unidimensional scale, χ^2 ($df = 16$) = 20.37, $p = .204$, CFI = .992; RMSEA = .023, 95% CI [.000; .049], SRMR = .025. On that basis, we averaged the eight items to create a composite victim blame scale, with an acceptable internal consistency, $\alpha = .71$. Higher scores indicated greater victim blame.

Certainty of rape judgement

Participants indicated how certain they were that the non-consensual sexual encounter qualified as rape on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (certainly not rape) to 7 (certainly rape) adopted from past work (Krahé et al., 2007).

Punishment attribution to the perpetrator

Participants indicated the extent to which they thought the perpetrator should be held criminally accountable for his action (Gul & Schuster, 2020) on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*absolutely*). Then they chose the punishment he deserved. Answers were made on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*no punishment*), 2 (*fine, but no prison*), 3 (*1–7 years in prison*), 4 (*8–15 years in prison*), 5 (*16–20 years in prison*), 6 (*more than 20 years in prison*). The two items were first converted into z-scores because of the difference in response scales and then averaged to create a composite score of punishment attribution to the perpetrator, $\alpha = .66$. Higher scores indicated more severe punishment recommendations.

Endorsement of honour norms

Participants responded to the ten items of the Honor Endorsement Index (HEI; Vandello et al., 2009; e.g. “A man must defend his honour at any cost”, “A woman must be pure and honest”). Given the scope of this study and the specific honour norms of Iranian society, we added the item “A woman must observe her husband’s needs or (in general) be obedient”. The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Items were averaged to create an honour endorsement score, with high internal consistency, $\alpha = .87$.

Endorsement of religious fundamentalism

Using the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (RFS; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004), participants indicated their fundamentalist beliefs on the 12-item scale (e.g. “To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to the one, fundamentally true religion”, “Whenever science and sacred scripture conflict, science must be wrong”). Responses were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) and averaged into a composite score based on high internal consistency, $\alpha = .89$.

Procedure

To ensure that judgments of the scenario would not be affected by making honour concerns and religious fundamentalist beliefs salient, the scenario was always presented first. That is, a fixed order of presenting the material was adopted. Participants then made their ratings of victim blame, certainty of rape judgement and attribution of punishment to the perpetrator. Next, participants indicated their endorsement of honour norms and religious fundamentalism before completing a manipulation check asking about the victim-perpetrator relationship between the couple. Finally, participants provided demographic information including gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status, dating preferences, place of residence, education level, religious affiliation, and socio-economic status.

Data-analytic strategy

A 2 (victim-perpetrator relationship) \times 2 (participant gender) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) tested Hypotheses 1–3 on victim blame, certainty of rape judgement and punishment attribution to the perpetrator. Significant multivariate effects were followed up with univariate effects. Significant interactions were decomposed by simple-effects tests, with Bonferroni corrections to decrease the risk of Type 1 error. Regression models tested Hypotheses 4–7, using the MLR estimator in Mplus, version 8.8 (Muthen & Muthen, 2012). The models included participant gender, victim-perpetrator relationship, centred honour norms and religious fundamentalism scores, and their respective interactions with victim-perpetrator relationship. Standardised regression coefficients are reported. Because the models were fully saturated, no model fit indices are available. Significant interactions were decomposed with the SPSS PROCESS macro using 95% bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 samples.

Transparency and openness

All hypotheses and analyses were preregistered on OSF (<https://osf.io/9sudc>). The data and analysis code are also available on OSF (<https://osf.io/4axs9/>). The verbatim research materials appear in Appendix C in the Online Supplementary Material. The Ethics Commission of the University of Bern approved the study as risk-free for the participants.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables across relationship constellations, separately for women and men. All pairwise correlations were significant except for a non-significant correlation between religious fundamentalism and punishment attribution to the perpetrator for men. Fisher's *z* test showed that no correlation coefficients differed significantly between women and men.

Effects of gender and victim-perpetrator relationship

The MANOVA indicated significant multivariate main effects of perceiver gender, Wilks' Lambda = 0.97, $F(3, 519) = 5.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, and victim-perpetrator relationship, Wilks' Lambda = 0.74, $F(3, 519) = 61.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .26$. Table 2 displays the means for the univariate effects.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, significant univariate main effects of perceiver gender revealed that men, compared to women, blamed the victim more, $F(1, 521) = 12.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, were less

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations.

Variables (range)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		1	2	3	4	5
	Women	Men					
1. Victim blame (1–7)	2.64 ^a (1.04)	2.95 ^b (0.97)	–	–.54***	–.50***	.41***	.36***
2. Certainty of rape judgement (1–7)	6.30 ^a (1.37)	5.82 ^b (1.75)	–.52***	–	.57***	–.27***	–.15**
3. Punishment attribution to the perpetrator ⁺	0.08 ^a (0.82)	–0.12 ^b (0.92)	–.54***	.68***	–	–.30***	–.14*
4. Honour norms endorsement (1–7)	2.94 ^a (1.33)	4.21 ^b (1.45)	.33***	–.19**	–.24**	–	.52***
5. Religious fundamentalism endorsement (1–7)	2.36 ^a (1.25)	2.62 ^b (1.39)	.22**	–.19**	–.11	.60***	–

Note: ^a, ^bMeans differ significantly between women and men. Correlation coefficients for women ($n = 321$) are shown above the diagonal, coefficients for men below the diagonal ($n = 204$). ⁺*z*-standardised score with a mean of 0 and an SD of 1.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for victim blame, certainty of rape judgement, punishment attribution to the perpetrator, endorsement of honour norms and religious fundamentalism by perceiver gender (female vs. male) and victim-perpetrator relationship (marriage vs. dating).

	Condition	N	Victim blame		Certainty of rape judgement		Punishment attribution to the perpetrator		Endorsement of honour norms		Endorsement of religious fundamentalism	
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Women	Marriage	145	2.70	1.10	5.98	1.69	-0.26	0.83	3.08	1.47	2.42	1.29
	Dating	176	2.59	0.99	6.57	0.95	0.36	0.69	2.82	1.20	2.58	1.30
Men	Marriage	96	3.12	1.02	5.24	2.09	-0.70	0.81	4.33	1.44	2.30	1.21
	Dating	108	2.80	0.91	6.34	1.17	0.39	0.68	4.10	1.45	2.67	1.47

Note: The measure of punishment attribution to the perpetrator was z-standardised. The scales for victim blame, certainty of rape judgement, endorsement of honour norms, and endorsement of religious fundamentalism ranged from 1 to 7.

certain that the sexual encounter was rape, $F(1, 521) = 13.35, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$, and attributed less severe punishment to the perpetrator, $F(1, 521) = 8.84, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .02$.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, all three univariate effects for victim-perpetrator relationship were significant. Compared to the date encounter, participants blamed the marital rape victim more, $F(1, 521) = 5.64, p = .018, \eta_p^2 = .01$, were less certain that the marital, as opposed to the dating, sexual encounter was rape, $F(1, 521) = 40.99, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$, and attributed less severe punishment to the marital rape perpetrator, $F(1, 521) = 160.54, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .24$.

These main effects were qualified by a significant multivariate interaction of perceiver gender and victim-perpetrator relationship, Wilks' Lambda = 0.98, $F(3, 519) = 4.14, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Supporting Hypothesis 3, a significant univariate interaction of gender and victim-perpetrator relationship was found on the attribution of punishment to the perpetrator, $F(1, 521) = 11.85, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Decomposing this interaction by victim-perpetrator relationship showed that women and men did not differ in their punishment for the date-rape perpetrator, but women recommended a significantly harsher sentence for the marital-rape perpetrator, $F(1, 521) = 19.17, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.04$, than men did, $F(1, 521) = 0.119, p = .731, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$ (see Table 2). Contrary to our prediction, however, the interaction was nonsignificant for victim blame and certainty that the sexual encounter was rape. Thus, the findings yield only partial support for Hypothesis 3.

The role of honour norms and religious fundamentalism

Separate regression analyses using Mplus were conducted for the endorsement of honour norms and religious fundamentalism to examine their hypothesised moderating role on the effect of victim-perpetrator relationship on the three outcome variables. The conditional effects of the moderators at lower and higher levels were set at values of ± 1 SD from the mean.

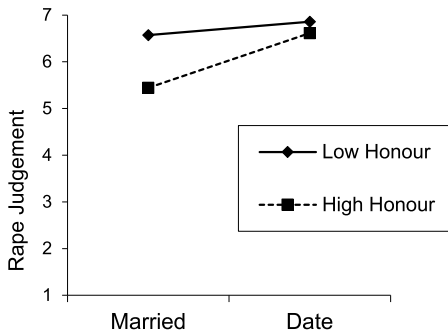
Consistent with Hypothesis 4, the more participants endorsed honour norms, the more they blamed the victim, $\beta = 0.47, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.21, 0.72]$, the less certain they were that the sexual encounter was rape, $\beta = -0.66, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.95, -0.36]$, and the less severe punishment they attributed to the perpetrator, $\beta = -0.71, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.95, -0.46]$.

In line with Hypothesis 5, we found a significant Honour Norms Endorsement \times Victim-Perpetrator Relationship interaction on the certainty that the sexual encounter was rape, $\beta = 0.45, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.20, 0.71]$, and on punishment attribution to the perpetrator, $\beta = 0.48, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.25, 0.71]$. For certainty of rape (see Figure 2, Panel a), the conditional effects revealed that participants with higher endorsement of honour norms were more certain that the sexual encounter was a rape in the date-rape scenario, coefficient = 0.73, $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.49, 0.98]$, than in the marital-rape scenario, coefficient = 1.17, $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.83, 1.53]$, whereas no such difference emerged among those with low endorsement of honour norms, coefficient = 0.29, $p = .108, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.63, 0.64]$. For punishment attribution (see Figure 2, Panel b), the strength of the significant conditional effects varied depending on endorsement of honour norms, even though it was significant for both levels. The effect was smaller for those with low levels of endorsement of honour beliefs, coefficient = 0.50, $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.33, 0.68]$, than for those with high levels, coefficient = 1.03, $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.85, 1.20]$. The tendency to punish the date rape perpetrator more than the marital rape perpetrator was more pronounced in participants with greater endorsement of honour norms. For victim blame, the interaction was nonsignificant.

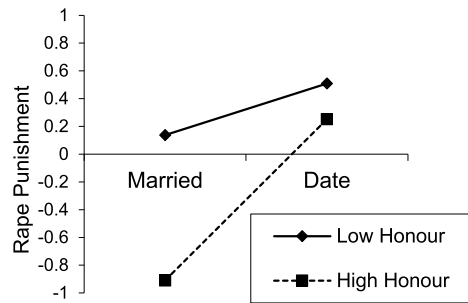
In line with Hypothesis 6, the more participants endorsed religious fundamentalism, the more they blamed the victim, $\beta = 0.47, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.20, 0.74]$, the less certain they were that the sexual encounter was rape, $\beta = -0.54, p = .003, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.88, -0.20]$, and the less severe punishment they attributed to the perpetrator, $\beta = -0.54, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.84, -0.25]$.

Supporting Hypothesis 7, and paralleling the results for honour norm endorsement, there was a significant Religious Fundamentalism \times Victim-Perpetrator Relationship interaction on the certainty that the sexual encounter was rape, $\beta = 0.40, p = .009, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.10, 0.69]$, and on punishment attribution,

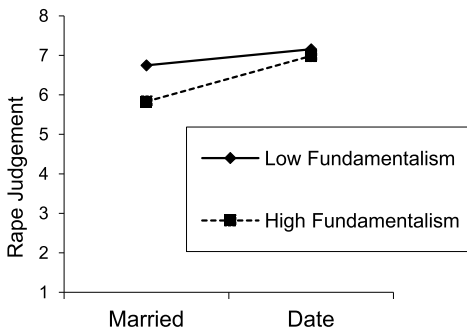
(a) Honour Norms & Rape Judgement



(b) Honour Norms & Rape Punishment



(c) Fundamentalism & Rape Judgement



(d) Fundamentalism & Rape Punishment

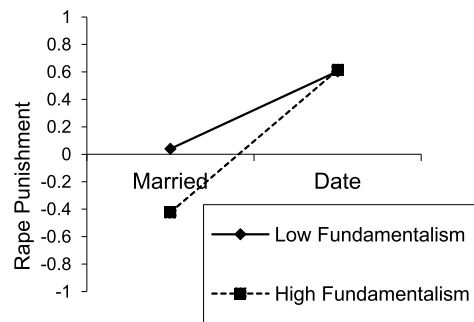


Figure 2. Moderation effects of honour norms endorsement and religious fundamentalism on certainty of rape judgement (panels a and c) and punishment attribution to the perpetrator (panels b and d) in the marital versus date sexual encounter.

$\beta = 0.45, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.18, 0.72]$. For certainty that the incident was rape, the strength of the significant conditional effects depended on how strongly participants endorsed religious fundamentalism (see Figure 2, Panel c). Participants were more certain that the dating than the marital scenario was rape, but the difference was more pronounced the higher participants scored on religious fundamentalism, low beliefs: coefficient = 0.41, $p = .024, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.05, 0.76]$, high beliefs: coefficient = 1.16, $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.80, 1.51]$. Similarly, and in parallel to the pattern for honour norms, more severe punishment was attributed to the perpetrator of date vs. marital rape, especially among participants with strong religious fundamentalist beliefs, low beliefs: coefficient = 0.56, $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.38, 0.74]$, high beliefs: coefficient = 1.04, $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.86, 1.22]$ (see Figure 2, Panel d).

Exploratory analysis

The two moderator variables, honour norms and religious fundamentalism, were substantially correlated in the total sample, $r(523) = .54, p < .001$, and in each gender group (see Table 1; correlation among men, $r(204) = .60, p < .001$, and among women, $r(321) = .52, p < .001$). Therefore, we ran a further model including both moderators together. This model showed that when both variables were included, the main effect and interaction of religious fundamentalism were no longer significant, indicating that endorsement of honour norms was a stronger predictor than religious fundamentalism of rape perceptions and the differential judgement of rape certainty in marital versus date sexual encounters.

Discussion

This study investigated how women and men in an Iranian sample perceived a non-consensual heterosexual encounter depending on the relationship between the female victim and the male perpetrator. We explored victim blame, certainty of rape judgment, and punishment attribution in scenarios where the woman and the man were either married or in a dating relationship.

Men, compared to women, attributed more blame to the rape victim, assigned less severe punishment to the perpetrator, and were less certain that the sexual encounter was rape, which is consistent with extensive evidence from Western societies indicating gender asymmetry in rape perception (see review by Gravelin et al., 2019). However, these findings contrast with two recent Iranian studies that found no gender differences in victim blaming (Bagherian et al., 2021; Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishhe Baboli, 2023). One study suggested that these results might be because Iranian women and men endorse similar gendered honour codes, such as beliefs that women should adhere to Islamic dress codes and avoid interactions with male strangers (Bagherian et al., 2021). In contrast, our findings revealed that men endorsed honour norms more strongly than women did. Therefore, future research could specifically investigate potential gender differences in victim blaming within Iranian samples.

Information about victim-perpetrator relationship affected participants' judgement of the non-consensual sexual encounter. Specifically, compared to the date rape scenario, the marital rape description resulted in more victim blame, less severe punishment attribution to the perpetrator, and a lower certainty of judging the incident as rape. These results are in line with the sexual precedence theory (Shotland & Goodstein, 1992), which posits that increased sexual activity within a couple leads perceivers to view their interactions as more consensual, less likely to classify as rape, and to be more inclined to exonerate the perpetrator (Martin et al., 2007). This explanation is supported by the findings of two studies showing no significant differences in the perceptions of rape incidents between a married couple and a couple in a relationship of the same length who was not legally married (Adams-Clark & Chrisler, 2018; Lynch et al., 2019). Moreover, this difference may be due to marital rape deviating more from the "real rape" script than date rape (Logan et al., 2015).

Our findings indicate similar punishment for date rape perpetrators by both women and men. However, women assigned a more severe punishment to perpetrators of marital rape compared to men. This may reflect the impact of gender-discriminatory laws, as Iranian law does not criminalise marital rape and lack of punitive action for marital-rape perpetrators (Islamic Penal Law, 2014). Thus, married women are in a vulnerable position. This may have led female participants to hold the married perpetrator more criminally accountable compared to men due to their identification with the married victim, further increasing the difference between the two scenarios.

Supporting our hypotheses, stronger endorsement of both honour norms and religious fundamentalism predicted greater victim blame, lower certainty that the incident constituted rape, and less severe punishment for the perpetrators of rape. This finding corroborates prior research indicating that higher endorsement of honour norms is associated with increased victim blaming (Canto et al., 2017). Despite the condemnation of aggressive actions, they can be perceived as morally justified in specific social relationships and contexts (relationship regulation theory; Rai & Fiske, 2012) where honour norms have been transgressed.

Additionally, participants with stronger endorsement of honour norms and religious fundamentalist beliefs expressed less certainty that the incident was rape and assigned less severe punishment to the perpetrator of marital rape compared to date rape. This outcome can be understood through the lens of different honour code violations present in each rape scenario, with violations of men's honour being particularly significant for those who adhere to honour-oriented beliefs. Research has shown that in cases where men's honour (i.e. masculinity and authority) is challenged, there is a greater tendency to blame the victim, as opposed to instances where the honour of a female or family member is violated (e.g. Canto et al., 2017; Dietrich & Schuett, 2013). In the context of marital rape, the wife's refusal of sex upon demand may be viewed as a threat to the husband's

honour, whereas the victim in the date rape scenario may be perceived as violating her own purity and sanctity (female honour codes) through dating (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023). Therefore, individuals with stronger honour beliefs may have tended to exonerate the husband more and minimise the seriousness of marital rape compared to the date rape incident.

The parallel results for higher religious fundamentalist beliefs predicting higher victim blaming can be elucidated through the moral tenets and gendered codes shared with honour culture (Ceylan-Batur & Uskul, 2022). The correlation between endorsing honour norms and religious fundamentalism was substantial for both men and women. Our exploratory analyses found that when both honour and religious fundamentalism were included in the same model, religious fundamentalism was no longer significantly associated with the measures of rape perception. Similar to honour norms, our findings align with previous research, showing that greater religious beliefs are associated with higher rape victim blaming (e.g. Heath & Sperry, 2021). Moreover, masculine and authoritative norms (representing male honour) can also explain the relationship between religious fundamentalism and violence against wives in honour cultures. This relationship ultimately serves to maintain the authority of men in controlling women (Flood & Pease, 2009), which may account for the relationship between religious fundamentalism and lower punishment of husbands, and the reduced certainty judgement of marital rape in comparison to date rape.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

The current study contributes to the limited body of research from Non-Western cultures on how women and men perceive rape scenarios in different victim-perpetrator constellations, contextualised by cultural norms about honour and religion. Drawing on established theories and research on rape perception in Western countries, we developed a set of hypotheses that consider the socio-cultural situation in Iran. By presenting evidence from Iran, this research enriches the cultural diversity of studies on rape perception beyond WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) nations (Henrich et al., 2010).

Some limitations need to be noted that suggest directions for future research. First, the use of a convenience sample may constrain the generalisability of our findings, although the sample matches representative figures in terms of living characteristics; 73.9% of participants reported residing in a large city, which closely aligns with Iran's national urban population rate (76%, The World Bank, 2021b). In terms of education level, the sample was skewed towards higher education, with 88.2% of participants holding a bachelor's degree or higher, exceeding the current educational enrolment rate of 70% in 2015, the latest available statistics (World Education Reviews News, 2017)

Furthermore, the composition of the sample may have been influenced by self-selection bias, as for ethical reasons, participants were informed at the outset that they would be required to read and assess a brief description of a non-consensual sexual encounter between a woman and a man. It is possible that individuals who perceive sexual aggression as a significant social issue in Iran were more likely to participate, while those uncomfortable with content related to sexuality may have opted out. However, it is important to note that any potential self-selection bias cannot account for the differences observed in the perception of the date-rape and marital-rape scenarios within the sample, as participants were randomly assigned to these scenarios.

Another limitation that highlights the need for future research concerns the rape scenarios. The vignette descriptions were brief and provided limited information about the victim, the perpetrator, and their behaviours before the encounter. Participants may have relied on generalised stereotypes about sexual assault rather than forming judgements based solely on the contents of the brief scenario descriptions (Temkin & Krahé, 2008).

Furthermore, to ensure the plausibility of the manipulation, we varied the length of the relationship and information about prior sexual history, as both factors significantly differentiate dating from marital relationships. Future research could consider using a dating scenario of equivalent length to the marital scenario, including a history of prior sexual encounters between the dating partners. This

adjustment would ensure that the scenarios differ only in terms of the legal status of the relationship, providing a clearer understanding of the specific normative context of marriage in perceptions and evaluations of non-consensual sexual interactions within Iranian culture.

Additionally, while the vignette approach is recognised as the most valid and reliable method for examining victim blaming in experimental studies (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), the use of different methodologies is encouraged, such as videotaping or qualitative approaches (e.g. Cohn et al., 2009). Future research could investigate differences in reactions to scenarios varying in length and level of detail. Regarding socio-cultural beliefs, this study focused on the associations of honour culture and religious fundamentalism with rape perception. Future research could explore the role of rape myth acceptance, just world beliefs, and traditional gender roles on perceptions of sexual assault across diverse victim-perpetrator relationships (Gul & Schuster, 2020). Another potential limitation is the fixed order of presenting the materials, with the scenarios always preceding the honour norms and religious fundamentalism measures. This sequence was chosen to ensure that responses to the scenarios, our primary concern, would not be influenced by prior considerations of attitudes potentially relevant to the evaluation of a sexual violence incident. Further research could benefit from systematically varying the order of presentation or randomising the sequence of the scenario and the other two scales.

Another avenue is to explore various aspects of religious fundamentalism in relation to tolerance of violence against women as this construct is multifaceted and can provide insights into understanding violence and gender hierarchy in society. Finally, given the inconsistent legal processing of rape cases in Iran, future research may focus on the parties involved in the criminal justice system (e.g. police, medical forensic examiners, attorneys, judges). Their perceptions of date and marital rape cases may have direct impact not only on the handling of reported cases, but also on victims' willingness to report a sexual assault (Krahé et al., 2008).

Implications for practice

The present findings have significant implications for individual, social, and institutional responses towards rape victims in Iran, particularly victims of marital and date rape. At the individual level, the well-being of rape victims depends on a sympathetic response from their social environment (e.g. family, friends, health care professionals), including the acknowledgement of the incident as a sexual assault in the first place, as it reduces self-blame in victims and helps them to acknowledge the incident as rape (Jaffe et al., 2021).

At the societal level, prevention programmes informed by robust theory and empirical evidence could challenge deeply ingrained social norms such as honour norms and religious fundamentalism that precipitate and tolerate sexual violence (Alvarez et al., 2016). For instance, research has demonstrated that addressing "pluralistic ignorance" (mutual misperceptions about collective attitudes and beliefs) can be effective in changing attitudes towards honour-based intimate partner violence (Vandello et al., 2009). Given that men often overestimate the acceptance of aggression and violence among other men, addressing this misconception could potentially reduce honour-related intimate violence. Hence, public campaigns aimed at exposing and addressing such misconceptions may effectively mitigate honour-related sexual violence (e.g. Gul et al., 2021). Furthermore, promoting the recognition of non-consensual sex as a form of violence could help to address the issue of victims not acknowledging their experiences as sexual assault (Marchewka et al., 2022).

The primary responsibility for improving the social and legal status of rape victims falls to the state, which holds the greatest authority and obligation to deliver justice to victims through the criminal justice system. In Iran's case, this entails reforming rape laws to criminalise both marital and acquaintance (date) rape, potentially reducing the scale of unreported rape and increasing the chances for victims to receive justice.

Acknowledgments

We thank Masoumeh Seidy for support with recruitment and data collection.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by a Swiss Federal Commission for Scholarships for Foreign Students (FCS) grant awarded to Shera Malayeri (grant number 2018.0812).

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Data availability statement

The data is available on OSF (<https://osf.io/4axs9>).

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