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Study: Men who have not experienced sexual abuse are less likely to believe it has happened to others

A study by a University psychology professor shows that this disbelief can make victims reluctant to come forward

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It is widely believed that most incidents of sexual abuse go unreported, but the crime itself might not be the end of a victim's troubles.

When victims come forward, they may also have trouble persuading some men to believe them, according to recent research at the University.

University psychology professor Jennifer Freyd and former graduate student Lisa Cromer co-authored the study, which found that men who had no previous experience of sexual abuse were significantly less likely to believe a victim's claims of abuse, or even consider the circumstance as abuse in the first place.

That doubt, Freyd said, does more than limit awareness of the issue.

"Not believing about abuse can be very damaging to the person that was abused," Freyd said. "That disbelief can really harm them."

In addition, such doubt in the claims of victims can make those who have experienced abuse more reluctant to come forward in the first place, Freyd said.

Freyd said this has always been a problem, and studies by the National Crime Victimization Survey suggest that more than half of all cases of sexual abuse go unreported. This most recent work in Freyd's Dynamics Lab at the University, she said, tries to explain that.

"My whole laboratory focuses on the impact of child abuse," she said. "Lisa and I were curious about why people often don't believe in an abuse account."

The answer, the study found, lies in a person's background.

The study, which used more than 300 University undergraduates as subjects, used a preliminary survey to determine if subjects were considered a "hostile sexist" - someone who views women negatively because of a perceived desire for control - or a "benevolent sexist" - one who puts women on a pedestal, as the survey said.

All subjects were shown a written testimonial of someone claiming have been forced into having sex as a child, then asked to rate the statement on believability and how abusive the behavior was.

Those who identified themselves in either of the two sexist categories were found to be less likely to consider the act abusive at all. Only the "hostile sexist" subjects were more willing to discredit the statement as false.

Sexist or not, men across the board also rated the believability of the statement lower than women, according to the study.

The results of the study confirm a negative environment for sexual abuse victims at the University, said Rebecca Sprinson, a two-year member of the Sexual Wellness and Advocacy Team at the University.

"I think underreporting is a sub-issue of a much bigger problem of sexual abuse," Sprinson said. "The fact that it is underreported says something about the climate here on campus."

Sprinson said the problem lies broader, and it is not just men who may not give enough merit to sexual abuse cases. She said the best way to improve that situation is through a better sense of openness that will encourage people to come forward.

"I would also urge people to consider this on a more personal level, because that's what's going on," Sprinson said, adding that people shouldn't get hung up on statistics that trivialize the subject.

Marcus Farley, director of the University's Men's Center, said the results of the study might demonstrate an already existing social attitude in men: being discouraged to seek help themselves, even if they need it.

"If men have been socialized into being frowned upon for needing help of any kind, this research could reflect that externalized attitude," he said.

As a result, Farley said, there could be an inherent discomfort of dealing with such emotional issues, leading to their possible reluctance to accept them in the first place.

Even if victims do report cases of abuse, Freyd said, they still may not receive help in many cases. She said the study hopes to change that.

"Some might get reported to someone in the person's life, but whether or not they do something about it is another question," Freyd said. "To me, this really opens the door to education, to educate them about this situation."

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