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THE FORBIDDEN TRUTH: RETHINKING NARRATIVES ON MALE SEXUAL ASSAULT

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Abstract: There is much research and growing attention on Gender-Based Violence (GBV), including rape against men and boys. There is substantial evidence indicating that sexual violence against men is common in most armed conflicts. Most of the research tends to focus on the prevalence and long and short-term impacts of sexual violence perpetrated against men during armed conflicts in different countries such as the former Yugoslavia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, and Darfur. There is a need for a more in-depth understanding of male victims' experiences in a holistic sense. Concepts such as resilience, courage, and connectivity are mainly overlooked, even though there are vehicles for growth and development. However, there are fundamental obstacles that male victims of SGBV are still facing, such as the lack of proper terminology to describe their experience. The current article sheds light on male victims conflicting feelings and struggles to conceptualize their sexual victimization experience as rape. Specifically, the article will explore the impact of lack of disclosure, minimization, and lack of proper terminology on the processing, healing, and recovery journey. The participants involved were male victims who endured sexual violence during the conflict in the Eastern region of Congo. Semi structured interviews were carried out to explore the core aspects of their experiences of sexual victimization in relation to the esteemed concepts of masculinity. Consistent with previous research, findings show that male victims understand the word rape. Nevertheless, they find it challenging to employ the term rape to characterize their experiences of sexual victimization, as the term is predominantly linked to acts of sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls. Furthermore, victimhood is primarily incompatible with the dominant masculine script.

Keywords: Rape, Gender-Based Violence, Male Victims, Rape Myths, Masculinity

Literature Review

A review of countless publications, research, and raperelated laws reveals that the term rape has been redefined to the point of rendering it vaguer and more complex (Savino and Turvey, 1944; Javaid, 2016; Siegel et al., 2021;

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Walfield, 2021; Thomas and Kopel, 2023). Sexual violence happens on a spectrum and rape represents the most extreme case (Siegel et al., 2021). In the past, the UCR SRC (Uniform et al.) with the FBI defined "forcible rape" as "the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will" (United States Department of Justice, 2012). This definition of rape was narrow, outdated, and non-gender-inclusive because it only included heterosexual sexual intercourse with a male penile forcibly penetrating a female vagina. Unfortunately, this definition of rape remained unchanged from 1927 until 2012, when it was updated. The updated definition of rape is as follows; "penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim" (United States Department of Justice, 2012). The above definition of rape is somewhat inclusive regardless of gender; it is not just about men raping women. This transformation was achieved through the collective efforts of victims and survivors, researchers, activists, advocates, and numerous allies who are dedicated to fostering significant changes and promoting a comprehensive gender-inclusive perspective in the understanding of rape and other forms of gender-based violence. Their work aims to challenge and dismantle gender stereotypes, stigmas, and biases associated with sexual violence (United States Department of Justice, 2012). This change is an essential step towards acknowledging that all victims matter, regardless of their gender, race, or sexual orientation. This change is also significant because it sends a message that perpetrators of sexual violence crimes will be held accountable. In spite of the revised definition of rape and the heightened awareness regarding rape and male sexual violence over the past year, male victims of rape and other types of sexual violence remain largely unacknowledged. Their experiences are often overlooked, inadequately punished, and insufficiently reported (Touquet andGorris, 2016; Yagi et al., 2023). This is generally the case due to adherence to rape myths, heteronormative scripts, and the dominant masculine paradigm (Hlavka, 2017; Yagi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the discourse surrounding the experiences of male victims of rape and other types of sexual violence has frequently been presented through a gendered lens (Javaid, 2017). This also fed into the subject being ignored and downplayed by the scientific community for a long time (Yagi et al., 2023).

What is Gender-Based Violence?

Before the feminist movement of 1960, the term gender-based violence was used to highlight different types of violence committed against women rooted in power inequality between men and women (Touquet and Gorris, 2016; Lara, 2009). In 1992, the concept of gender-based violence was characterized as "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately" (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 1992, general recommendation 19). Activists and scholars continue to fight for gender inclusivity and increased visibility for male victims of gender-based violence. Over the years, the meaning, usage, and understanding of the term gender-based violence have been conceptualized to include both genders. Rape is one form of gender-based violence that focuses on the penetration of the body. In a broader sense, "Gender-based violence constitutes an extensive range of physical and psychological actions, including acts of penetration, sexual assault, genital mutilation, forced pregnancy, culturally inappropriate actions that sexually harass and humiliate, as well as nonsexual acts perpetrated on the basis of gender, such as sex-selective killing" (Ferrales et al., 2016).

The Historical Context of the Use of Female-Specific Approach to Sexual Violence

Male Rape

In order to gain a deeper insight into the various factors that contribute to the insufficient visibility and inclusivity for male victims of sexual violence, it is essential to consider the historical context surrounding the use of female-

centric terminology in discussions of gender based violence, as well as the inherently gendered aspects of rape. Legal scholars have characterized the evolution of international law, including early human rights, criminal legislation, and internal humanitarian regulations, as primarily reflecting men's experiences, often neglecting women's concerns (Miller, 2004; Lara, 2009). For example, the 1945 United Nations Charter and the preamble of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights highlight the principles of freedom, equal rights, dignity, and respect for all individuals, irrespective of gender distinctions (U.N. Charter Preamble, 1945 and the preamble of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights). During the early period of the human rights movement, women's issues were wholly disregarded despite all the documents instructed for change (Lara, 2009). It was during the mid-1980s that the women's rights movement began advocating for the acknowledgment of violence against women as a violation of human rights (Miller, 2004; Lara, 2009). The longstanding disregard for women's issues has shaped the United Nations and international law's development of a gender-specific framework for addressing gender-based violence (Lara, 2009). The concept of gender-based violence was initially formulated to highlight and increase awareness regarding the disparities related to sexual and various other types of violence inflicted upon women (Touquet and Gorris, 2016). The global women's movement played a significant role in enhancing awareness and visibility regarding the effects of sexual violence in conflict areas (Touquet and Gorris, 2016). Despite evidence documenting the existence of male victims, for many years, terms such as conflict-related sexual violence and gender-based violence were used interchangeably to address violence committed against women perpetrated by men Lara (2009). For over 30 years, activists and feminist researchers have conceptualized rape and sexual assault as a women's issue (Javaid, 2016). This is an ongoing issue that continues to reinforce the exclusion and lack of visibility for male victims. For example, Humanitarian laws and interventions in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a nation previously recognized as a hotspot for rape and various forms of sexual violence, have been mainly aimed at addressing the needs of women and girls (Yagi et al., 2023). Gender-sensitive initiatives and efforts to combat rape primarily focus on alleviating the distress experienced by women and girls (Ines, 2023). Consequently, male and boys victims frequently receive insufficient attention and are often overlooked in awareness campaigns. Furthermore, male victims are seen as a threat to the limited support provision that is put in place for female rape victims (Javaid, 2016; Yagi et al., 2023). While individuals of all genders may experience conflict-related sexual violence, the majority of feminist theories have predominantly emphasized men as the aggressors in cases of rape and women as the victims. Sotrr, 2011; Javaid, 2016).

Masculine Paradigms and Male Rape

While the social construction of women as physically weak and sexually vulnerable fits the stereotypical view of victims of sexual violence and various manifestations of gender-based violence, the expectations and requirements of manhood (invulnerability, strong, tough, powerful, self-sufficient, and impenetrable) challenges the concept of victimhood in general (Hlavka, 2017). Traditionally, men are expected to display power, strength, competitiveness, and aggressiveness. Furthermore, men are expected to reject feminine traits such as emotional expression and affection, especially with the same sex. Six categories of myths reinforce the heteronormative and hegemonic masculine nature of American men (Kassing et al., 2005), including (a) Men cannot be overpowered or raped because they are powerful and strong; (b) Men initiate sex and cannot be targeted because they are sexual beings; (c) Male victims of rape and various forms of sexual violence experience a loss of their masculinity, as the traditional masculine framework does not accommodate the concept of sexual victimization. (d) Rape and sexual violence against men is rare; (e) Men can cope easily with sexual victimization because they are physically

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and emotionally strong; and (f) Sexual violence against men only happens in prison (Kassing et al., 2005). Other myths regarding male rape based on male gender role socialization include; (a) Men are not capable of being raped; (b) "True men" ought to protect themselves from rape or sexual assault; (c) Only homosexual men can be both victims and offenders of rape; (d) The impact of rape on men is not as significant as it is on women; (e) Women cannot commit sexual assault or rape against men; (f) Sexual assault or rape against bisexual and homosexual men is warranted due to perceived immorality and deviance; (g) Same-gender sexual assault or rape leads to the development of homosexuality; and (h) a physical reaction to rape or sexual assault is equivalent to consent (Turchik and Edwards, 2012; Donnelly and Kenyon, 2014). These damaging myths and misconceptions regarding male rape are deeply rooted in societal norms and stigmas related to male sexuality and masculinity and they seem to be accepted by a considerable segment of the population (Turchik and Edwards, 2012; Donnelly and Kenyon, 2014). Stigma is associated chiefly with societal response to an attribute and less about the attribute itself (Crocker et al., 1998; Dovidio and Hebl, 2005). According to (Dovidio and Hebl, 2005), stigma is a byproduct of society or a group of people that recognize an attribute as being different, which leads to a marginalization of individuals with those attributes. Pryor and Reeder (2011) identified four ways that stigma works based on their conceptual model: (A) self-stigma, (b) Public stigma, (c) Structural stigma, and (d) Stigma by association. According to the conceptual model of stigma, public stigma is a societal view of a group of people with a stigmatized trait. In contrast, selfstigma is an internalization of a stigmatized attribute. Male sexual victimization is an excellent example of the interplay between self-stigma, public stigma, and structural stigma (Ralston, 2020). The public approval and support of male rape manifest at the individual, societal, and institutional levels. Male victims end up internalizing the dominant rape myths that exclude men from being recognized as legitimate victims or survivors of sexual violence, which can lead to self-blame, shame, embarrassment, lack of help-seeking behavior, not reporting the crime to the police, and having to suffer alone (Yagi et al., 2023; Ralston, 2020. Gorris, 2015) asserts that the significant divide between visible and invisible victims largely stems from their 'gender identity,' resulting in systemic discrimination against male victims of rape and other types of sexual violence. Rape as a women's issue continues to polarize women as victims and men as perpetrators (Javaid, 2016). Male Rape and Meaning-Making Petersson and Plantin (2019) conducted a study to understand ways that male victims make sense of their sexual assault experience. Through in-depth interviews with adult male victims of sexual assault in Switzerland, four major themes emerged from their analysis regarding ways that men understand, process, and express their experiences: (1) Conflicting feelings and difficulties conceptualizing sexual assault. Male victims of sexual assault demonstrate ambivalence and reservation utilizing the term "rape" to characterize their experience of sexual victimization. The word rape aligns with victimhood and is often associated with women. A majority of men tend to choose alternative terms instead of rape when discussing their experiences of sexual victimization. The word rape is sometimes used in cases where there is forced penetration and severe sexual violence. In terms of manipulation, blackmail, and subtle coercion make sexual assault challenging to conceptualize. (2) Re-experiencing vulnerability and relieving their sexual victimization experiences through vivid and emotional memories and flashbacks. (3) Emotional responses and resistance. Most participants in this study opposed and stood against any form of violence committed against any humans or animals because it is a constant reminder of moments of vulnerability and painful memories. (4) Disclosure and creativity: Male victims disclose their experience with hesitation, sparing details, and generally avoiding deeper conversation. Prior to the emergence of the women's movement, women who were victims frequently faced skepticism and were often held

responsible for their own victimization. Nowadays, most males struggle to identify themselves as victims because victimhood is a transgression against the dominant masculine script of invulnerability and impenetrability Furthermore, victims avoid disclosure and are destined to endure their suffering in solitude due to perceived or actual social reactions, which can be hurtful and retraumatizing. Other male victims minimize their experience. An individual can minimize, reject, or internalize the sexual violence experienced. However, the devastating short and long-term impact of the trauma is a constant reminder and a form of prison that one cannot escape from.

Least Most Helpful Aspect of Treatment

Male victims can undergo a recovery process that includes transformation from victims to survivors (Ralston, 2020). There is limited data on what male victims find to be the least and most helpful aspect of their recovery process (Ellis et al., 2020). According to Ellis et al. (2020), some of the most helpful aspects of treatment include (a) Peer support (mental health groups, group therapy, mutual aid groups, etc.). Group therapy for male victims creates a safe and non-judgmental space that challenges the harmful isolation, shame, and internalized rape myths found in the larger society and the negative impacts of male socialization through connection and intimacy (Fisher et al., 2008). Something is healing about breaking the code of silence by sharing one's experience while receiving support and supporting others. For healing to happen, it is essential for male victims to feel heard, believed, and validated (Ellis et al., 2020). (B) Male victims in the study conducted by Ellis et al. (2020) also identified specific interventions to be helpful, such as meditation, grounding exercises, mindfulness, processing emotions (shame, guilt, etc.), addressed cognitions and schemas. Clark (2023) offers a new framework for resilience by specifically exploring different types of connectivity and how they hinder or support healing. The study explored what resilience looks like daily for victims/survivors of conflict-related gender-based violence and how it is expressed in different cultural contexts (Columbia and Uganda). The author accentuates three elements of connectivity: (A) Broken and ruptured connectivity. Rape and sexual violence against men can damage connectivity through shame, judgment, isolation, fear, and loneliness (Yagi et al., 2023). Male victims also experience broken and ruptured connectivity through the death of family members, dislocation due to war, and ostracization (Clark, 2024; Yagi et al., 2023). (B) Supportive and sustaining connectivity: The ability to ground oneself in the moment and connect to the wonder of nature can support and sustain connectivity. For example, a female interviewee shares her ability to find pleasure in small things, such as "hearing the sound of a bird singing in the morning" (Clark, 2023). There is a feminine connotation to the sensitivity and attunement required to connect with nature's simple pleasures. Being a sensitive male can be frowned upon in societies that value typical masculine traits such as stoicism and strength. Support and sustain connectivity can also derive from humanitarian organizations and international committees' inclusion of male victims in the allocation of resources and the fight against rape and various manifestations of violence based on gender. Regrettably, male victims frequently find themselves marginalized by these organizations and their initiatives. There is minimal healing without 'repairing systems of relatedness' (Oliveira and Baines, 2022). For healing to happen, male victims need to rebuild new connections with themselves and everything around them through caring relationships, reciprocity, sensitivity, openness, and attunement. (C) New connectivity: Renewal entails movement and fluidity. For example, they can move past or transform the pain by giving it a new meaning. Helping others can create a new meaning and purpose beyond the trauma. Clark (2023) shares the story of a survivor who found new meaning by helping vulnerable people in her community. Reciprocally, they, too, touched her life in an unexpected and healing way. Male victims can find new meaning by redefining masculinity in a way that integrates their sexual trauma. For example, a Congolese male victim

redefined his identity as a man through compassion and discernment by stating, 'I am fully a man with little strength (…)', a man is more than his physical body and what it can accomplish" (Yagi et al., 2023). There are many barriers and limitations to accessing the helpful aspect of treatment. First, male victims know what rape is (Siegel et al., 2021); however, they struggle to conceptualize their experience as rape (Petersson and Plantin, 2019). As mentioned earlier, this feeds into the code of silence, shame, self-blame, isolation, confusion, minimization, emotional avoidance, lack of help-seeking behavior and, ultimately, suffering alone. Secondly, there is an insufficient availability of resources for male victims (Yagi et al., 2022; Yagi et al., 2023). The final limitation is linked to healthcare providers' insufficient understanding and training in effectively working with male victims without causing further harm.

Methods

Methods: Phenomenology

Based on the study objectives and research questions mentioned in the introduction, a phenomenological research design was used to study male victims shared and lived experiences in the DRC and across cultures. A phenomenological study aims to distill individual experiences related to a phenomenon into a description of a universal essence (Creswell and Poth, 2016). This analytical method is characterized as a "bottom-up approach," wherein themes are derived from the raw data rather than employing an existing theory to pinpoint themes applicable to the data. Bracketing or suspending one's beliefs, biases, and subjective experiences was used to validate the research process and result.

Data Collection and Analysis

In light of the study's aim to enhance the comprehension of sexual violence and rape perpetrated against men in conflict areas, a non-probability sampling method was employed for data collection. A purposive sampling approach was used to select suitable participants from specific villages in the Eastern region of the Congo. To qualify for inclusion in this study, individuals were required to be a minimum of 18 years old and to selfidentify as victims or survivors of sexual violence related to conflict. Fourteen participants participated in the study and the data collection was completed within a few weeks. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Swahili. Below are specific open-ended questions that participants were invited to answer with as many details as possible: (1) To begin, I would appreciate it if you could provide more information regarding your experience with sexual violence. Could you please elaborate on the events that transpired? (2) In your view, what factors do you believe contributed to the occurrence of sexual violence? (3) How do you interpret or understand the situation? (4) What transpired following the incident? (A) Did you seek any form of help or support? (B) If so, from whom or where did you seek assistance? Please describe the outcome. (C) If not, how would you account for that decision? (5) Do you perceive yourself as the same individual you were before the incident? (a) What was your life like before? (b) How does your life compare now? (6) Have you encountered comments regarding male sexual victimization from those around you, such as family, friends, or the broader community? How would you characterize their responses? (7) What are your thoughts and feelings regarding those comments? (8) Traditionally, what does it signify for you to be considered 'a real man'? How do you define masculinity? (9) How do you view yourself today in relation to your understanding of masculinity? (10) What are your current needs? (a) Please outline the challenges and obstacles you are facing. (B) How would your life change if those needs were fulfilled? Each interview was recorded in audio format. A professional translator subsequently translated the original audio into English. A back-to-back translation method was employed to compare the English versions of the interviews with

the original Swahili text to ensure accuracy and eliminate potential discrepancies. Similar to a recent article on interviewing male survivors of sexual violence (Weare and Hulley, 2023), The subsequent critical ethical and methodological concerns emerged: (1) The difficulty in recruiting male victims of sexual violence due to the covert and taboo aspects associated with the topic. Considering this, the researcher and her assistant relied on snowballing sampling, where study participants recruited other male victims to be part of the sample. (2) The challenge and ethical dilemma around the interview process were also addressed. Before the interviews, participants were provided with a detailed informed consent document outlining the project's aims, risks, benefits, confidentiality, anonymity, compensation, voluntary participation, and using current data in future research studies. For example, ethical privacy and anonymity issues were addressed by assuring participants that any information shared would be kept entirely confidential and that the data would solely be utilized for the purposes of this research and subsequent studies. Furthermore, any identifiable information had a number instead of individuals' names; only the researcher and her assistant would know those numbers. Participants were informed that audio recordings would be securely transferred to the leading researcher's password-protected computer in an encrypted format. These recordings would be deleted following transcription to safeguard their identities. (3) Gender dynamics between interviewers and participants were considered. At the time of the data collection, the research assistant was pursuing a master's degree in clinical psychology at the Université Evangeliquean Afrique (UEA), located in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The research assistant focuses on providing support to victims of gender-based violence, regardless of gender, within this region. Considering the researcher's aim to provide male victims with an opportunity to express their experiences. the primary researcher and her assistant ensured that the interview experience was non-judgmental and conducted safely and respectfully. Participants were empowered to choose the gender of the person interviewing them; they valued the platform and opportunity to share their sexual victimization experience regardless of the interviewer's gender. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, counseling services were provided to participants during and immediately following the interview to address any distress or traumatic reactions. A thematic data analysis method was used to read through transcripts from semi-structured interviews and identify patterns in meaning across the data to derive themes. Specifically, (Braun and Clark, 2006) six phases of thematic analysis were used. The systematic steps are: (1) Acquainting yourself with the data, (2) Creating preliminary codes, (3) Identifying themes, (4) Evaluating themes, (5) Clarifying and labeling themes and (6) Compiling the report.

Results

A few themes emerged from the thematic data analysis regarding participants having to suffer alone in silence and struggling to employ the term rape to articulate their experiences of sexual victimization and the associated effects. The three themes were the following: (A) gratefulness, (b) Vocabulary used to qualify the vents (s)/Sexual trauma, and (c) Suffering. Viktor Frankl's theory of meaning and existential analysis will be integrated briefly in the result section to deepen the findings. The selection of Frankl's theory is based on its focus on the pursuit of meaning and purpose in life, which it identifies as the fundamental motivation for human beings.

Gratefulness

Most participants were grateful to the lead researcher and her team for addressing a complex issue others had overlooked. The topic of conflict-related sexual violence against men in the eastern region of the Congo remains a controversial and taboo subject (Yagi et al., 2023; Storr, 2011). The secrecy surrounding the topic at hand can create a lack of visibility for victims and no platform to share their trauma. The word gratefulness was commonly

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used to express thanks for being saved by a higher power, for daily survival, and for the opportunity to tell their stories. Several participants described the experience of being rescued and saved by a higher power or God from the initial sexual violence attack. For example, participant 1 articulated the concept of divine grace about his survival by expressing: "It's by grace that I left the place. So, after the confrontations, the time to see people who have died, like our friends D and M. Then, they found me alive" Participants also relied on their relationship with God to make meaning of what they described as senseless suffering and violence linked to the armed conflict in the DRC and suffering associated with the aftermath of the war. For example, participants described suffering connected to (a) Lack of support from spouses, family members, and the community as a whole, which reinforces the culture of silence and isolation, (b) Suffering linked to the severe and ongoing symptoms of sexual assault and various manifestations of gender-based violence, suffering linked to not being able to reclaim their masculinity status as provider, producers, protectors and procreator and existential suffering. For instance, participant 1 articulated various dimensions of suffering by likening his experience of masculinity following sexual trauma to that of a cow. He remarked: "For me, a man is not like a cow. Because when it can be sick, they can kill it, but a human being is not a cow. For other things, I am ready to be killed. But I am still in my situation of life" A severely wounded animal such as a cow can be killed out of compassion to put it out of its misery. Several participants described masculinity as life and its loss as a form of death. Despite suffering and misery linked to their current reality, participants mentioned that their daily survival needs are met through divine intervention by grace. For example, participant 2 expressed gratitude to God by stating: "I live by the grace of God. I fear going out because I could meet them and be a victim again. Besides the life of God, I have nothing else" Considering the participants' experiences in utilizing spirituality and their connection with God as a means to address incidents of sexual violence, it is crucial to integrate a spiritual framework in the journey toward healing and recovery. Finally, consistent with recent research (Weave and Hulley, 2023), participants expressed gratitude for the safe and non-judgmental space offered by the main researcher and her assistant during the process. Male victims in this study valued the opportunity to share their stories and feel heard. This is particularly important given the historically taboo nature of the subject matter and the silencing of victims' voices. For instance, Participant 1 recounted the feeling of being overlooked by expressing. "First, I am grateful to see you because since we were victims till now, no one has asked me about what and how happened to me." He added: "I will be happy if you plead for us and see if we will get treatment because it is just women who are visited but not men." Participant 1 was sexually victimized ten years before the interview took place and he was doomed to suffer in silence until the researcher created the opportunity for participants to share their trauma through interviews. The study's novelty and contribution lie in the importance of giving male victims of conflict-related sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo a distinctive opportunity to step forward and recount their experiences. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has previously been referred to as the 'rape capital of the world' (AllAfrica, 2017). The struggle to combat rape and various forms of genderbased violence has been closely associated with the liberation of women and girls, while men have frequently been left out of these discussions. Furthermore, training on sexual and gender-based violence within the mental health and medical community in the DRC is specifically tailored to meet the needs of females and young women (Christian et al., 2011). Men and boys' victims are often overlooked and ignored. The current study is a way of including male victims in the discussion against rape and other gender-based violence by inviting them to partake in the discourse through their testimonies of courage, pain, suffering, resilience, survival, and faith.

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Vocabulary Used to Qualify the Event (s) Experienced

During the initial interview, all participants, except for one, avoided using the forbidden word rape to describe their sexual trauma. Most participants choose various other terms to describe their experience, including being beaten/hit, anally penetrated with various objects without using rape, tortured, undressed, and humiliated in public. One participant explained: "Some of them proposed to kill me, but for others, they suggested to hit me half a dead…directly, they caught me, tied me up, and began to beat me. Besides, I still have a whip here of the stick they used. I was hit up till the blood covered my whole face. If I show you all my back, you will see the signs of these strikes" (Participant 1). Similarly, participant 8 was beaten to the point of losing consciousness and endured permanent marks as a reminder of the trauma. He explained: "They continued to hit me until the separation of the body and the heart. And where I was hit at my ass, it swelled to cause a wound that does not heal" (Participant 8) A few participants talked about their genitals being targeted and destroyed. While the majority of participants refrained from using the term rape to characterize their experiences of sexual trauma, their bodies are canvases that are permanently marked by the trauma. Some participants dared to share more details about being anally penetrated with various objects while staying away from the word rape. For example, they talked about being inserted in the anus with soap (Participant 2) and pepper (Participant 10). Before sharing his experience of being inserted into the anus with a bamboo stick, Participant 13 had to permit himself to overcome the masculine script of impenetrability and the shame attached to transgressing the male code. He stated, "I will not be ashamed, even to speak. They took the bamboo and introduced it in my ass." It is not uncommon that male victims of rape experience shame and guilt because the trauma collides with gender norms and rape myths that are reinforced and believed by many, including victims and survivors. Male rape myths' acceptance is primarily influenced by societal beliefs on how men and women should act and what is considered acceptable and unacceptable in people's eyes, including victims. Male rape is considered unacceptable because "a real man" should be able to protect themselves. Failing short of the male code duty to protect oneself and others triggers shame, confusion, humiliation, and distress. Consistent with current research, most male victims of sexual violence internalize the damaging narratives from different sources, including friends, family, support services, the public, and medical outlets (Widanaralalage et al., 2022; Yagi et al., 2023). There is minimal public acknowledgment, minimal available resources, no opportunity to feel heard and experience compassion, and no justice for male victims. This reinforces the invisibility of male victims and the reluctance to recognize and openly discuss their sexual victimization experience. It takes courage and strength to overcome shame and challenge the male code through reclaiming their voices. Healing is a process and it starts with acknowledging the rape and voicing the depth of the trauma and exposing the brutality of perpetrators. Some male victims find their voices after many years of suffering alone in silence. The courage to voice one's suffering does not suggest weakness for victims who suffer in silence. Male rape is a hidden crisis that is complex, multidimensional and nuanced. In the subsequent interview, when the research assistant inquired whether the participants considered their experiences of sexual violence to be classified as rape, they expressed strong agreement without any hesitation. For example, the participant stated with strong conviction, "Yes, it was rape. Ehhtruly a rape, it is a rape" (Yagi et al., 2023). Consistent with previous research, participants understand the word rape and the meaning of it cognitively. However, there is a disconnection that prevents them from seeing themselves as rape victims because it does not align with their self and social identity as a "real man." The "real man' myth rejects femininity and the exhibition of traits linked with the opposite sex. The word rape itself is linked to the opposite gender. Carl Jung

(1964/1968) writes about life consisting of complex, inexorable opposites such as birth and death, day and night. Although opposites are distinct things, they also co-exist together. For example, there is no death without birth, nights without days, misery without happiness, or sickness without health. For balance to happen, the opposites must complement each other on a spectrum. This concept also applies to femininity and masculinity. As mentioned earlier, most male victims tend to reject anything remotely associated with femininity and overidentify with the past self through the lens of the male code. Consequently, the word rape is unacceptable and incompatible with the self and societal image of manhood. Sometimes the rejection of the word rape functions on the subconscious level. Any repressed energy or rejection of a part of the self (victimhood) while favoring the other (the dominant masculine traits) can form a shadow that negatively possesses us (Yung, 1964). The shadow or repressed part of the self can consume the victim and manifest through shame, self-blame, feelings of being lost, suicidality, and depression. Rape myths, lack of compassion, lack of care, and lack of connectivity reinforce the shadow energy and keep the victim stuck.

Discussion

We rarely hear success stories of male victims and their transformative journey from being a victim to a survivor. Male victims of rape are rarely given the chance to voice their trauma and to feel heard. Male survivors of sexual assault and various types of gender-based violence are not eternally destroyed or damaged by the violence committed against them; they are forever altered. The "real man" myth acceptance is rigid and unforgiving. The absence of recognition regarding rape and the experience of enduring suffering in silence significantly restricts the chance to mourn the loss of one's former self before the occurrence of sexual trauma. Most participants seemed stuck in the moment of impact and its negative consequences. Even though exposure to extreme adversity, threats, and trauma such as sexual violence can trigger negative responses and symptoms, some individuals achieve a positive adaptation regardless of adversity. The adaptive response to extreme adversity is resilience (Botero-García et al., 2023). Resilience is "the capacity of both individuals and their environment to interact in ways that optimize developmental processes" (Ungar, 2013; Clark, 2023). Clark (2023) uses the concept of ecological connectivity as a framework to think about resilience and its connection to conflict-related genderbased violence. Connectivity draws attention to movements and interactions between and within ecosystems (Tischendorf and Fahrig, 2000). Connectivity is the unimpeded movement of people's lives, relationships, and interactions with the world around them in a way that promotes and sustains life. Yagi et al. (2022) examine different ways that conflict-related sexual violence can damage connectivity in relationships to the self and others. For example, prior to experiencing sexual trauma, all 14 participants predominantly depended on the conventional male code to shape their self-identity, social identity, and roles within both the family structure and the community. As a result, they derived meaning and purpose from conforming to rigidly established gender roles and expectations of masculinity. Following the trauma, participants expressed feelings of emasculation and a sense of being "no longer a real man" (Yagi et al., 2022). Several participants shared the stigma and social isolation from the community with minimum opportunity for reparation and relatedness (Yagi et al., 2022). Connectivity can be fostered by reconnecting small and isolating groups of individuals and restoring their ability to function in a larger society more resiliently (Doerr et al., 2014). Research on Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) is based on the mantra, "What does not kill you makes you stronger." Despite the harmful impact of sexual violence, resilience appears to be a protective factor that can lead to PTG. John et al. (2014) Identified five factors associated with PTG: (1) Personal strength, (2) Relating to others, (3) New possibilities, (4) Spiritual change and appreciation of life.

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Furthermore, PTG is about making the invisible visible through an increase in existential awareness (Vachon et al., 2016). According to (Vachon et al., 2016), "existential awareness may trigger an existential wound but also reveal existential meaning". (Frankl, 1969) existential theory highlights three avenues for discovering existential meaning in life: (1) Creative: What we give to the world and those around us regarding creation and contribution; (2) Experiential: What we take from the world regarding the appreciation of beauty (the experience of love, admiring nature, arts, etc.); and (3). Attitudinal meaning: The stance one takes when facing a situation out of control. Most participants' sense of connection with the world and source of meaning in life was shuttered by sexual trauma to the point of creating an existential crisis or a complete sense of meaningless. Frankl (1969) believed that suffering is an escapable part of life and existential crisis can be resolved by discovering new sources of meaning in life and redefining one's identity. Given that masculine norms shape the expression and processing of sexual trauma, it is crucial to help male victims redefine masculinity in a constructive way that facilitates healing and growth. Yagi et al. (2023) suggest the use of Jungian archetypes as a way to renegotiate destructive masculine norms in a constructive way where multiple experiences can co-exist. According to (Yagi et al., 2023), "When well-integrated, the King, the Warrior, the Magician, and the Lover archetypes nurture compassion and self-compassion, as well as a more benevolent definition of the self and a pathway towards growth and healing after trauma.

Conclusion

Trauma, suffering, grief, loss, life adversities, and other highly challenging life circumstances can be an opportunity for posttraumatic growth. Based on the participants' narratives, the feeling of being destroyed and damaged is linked to having to suffer in silence and the trauma festering from inside and out. As stated by a survivor, "You are only as sick as your secrets" (Domitrz, 2005). The tragedy for male victims of rape is that they are often disbelief, shunned, isolated, and even blamed for not protecting themselves and preventing the rape. The rigid enforcement of established gender norms and conventional portrayals of masculinity contributes to the ongoing invisibility of male victims. Furthermore, the culture of rape contributes to the normalization of sexual violence directed towards men. Most research over the years describes women victims of sexual violence as the disproportionate majority and men as perpetrators. This narrative has been held and believed in society for many years to the point where the word rape itself has become a forbidden word for the identified perpetrators, men. Male sexual assault is prohibited across various cultures and societies and among those who have experienced it. Consistent with previous studies, most male victims tend to internalize their trauma, minimize their experience, and avoid self-disclosure (Petersson and Plantin, 2019; Yagi et al., 2022). The humiliation and self-blame run deep. The humiliation is linked to being wholly stripped of one's sense of control, failing to adhere to the expectations of masculinity, loss of identity, and the feeling of powerlessness that accompanies that experience. There is also the shame and humiliation of being unable to protect one's family. Whether the trauma is verbalized or not, the body keeps score and remembers the traumatic experience. Participants discussed the persistent effects of trauma on both physical and psychological levels. Physically, they reported issues such as chronic pain, headaches, back pain, balance difficulties, weakness, reduced strength, urinary incontinence, hematuria, lack of vitality, and hemorrhoids. Psychologically, they experienced symptoms associated with PTSD, including nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and memory impairment (Ines, 2021). During the initial interview, the researcher and her assistants created a safe space where participants felt seen, heard, and believed. In the subsequent interviews, when participants were questioned about whether their sexual trauma met the criteria for

rape, participants permitted themselves to acknowledge the rape without minimizing, avoiding, or distorting their sexual victimization experience. The research assistant and her collaborators extended compassion to male victims and this created a mirror effect where they were able to develop self-compassion and acknowledge their sexual trauma by using proper terminology, the word rape. Until men are fully valued and accepted as human beings with emotions and vulnerabilities, male victims will continue to be subjected to rape myths and forced to suffer alone without a voice. There is a healing power in being able to break the silence and speak about one's experience of rape and listen to survivors' stories of courage, growth, wisdom, and healing. To transition from victim to survivor of rape, one must face the depth of despair by entering the deep dark, frightening hole before emerging into the other side, whatever that other side may look like. For some, the other side is a place where the trauma no longer defines one's life. Healing starts with the acknowledgment of the rape and its impacts through sharing stories, being believed, feeling heard, supported, validated, and being treated with kindness and compassion. There is minimal healing without processing feelings and emotions linked to the trauma and creating a new sense of meaning. Finally, the process of healing also requires re-inventing masculinity in a way that embodies a new individual identity that does not disapprove or reject their sexual victimization experience (Ralston, 2020; Ines, 2021).

Therapeutic Implication and Applicability

To work effectively with male victims, concepts of masculinity and manhood are essential parts of the journey towards redefining the self and rediscovering meaning after sexual trauma. Therapy for male victims of sexual violence requires a male-centered approach that acknowledges critical challenges and best strategies for supporting men in their journey toward healing and recovery. For example, therapy for male victims requires critical elements such as (1) Challenging the societal myths and misconceptions surrounding sexual violence perpetrated against men, as well as the inconsistencies that exist between conventional masculine ideals and the experience of victimization. (2) Provide a safe and nonjudgmental space for male victims to share traumatizing reality and ongoing impacts on them, (3) To identify unhelpful coping and (4) To accompany male victims in reporting the crime and navigating the justice system. Acknowledging the gendered nature of male sexual violence experience and male-specific needs can increase help-seeking behavior and engagement in support (Widanaralalage et al., 2022). Furthermore, it is essential to help male victims rediscover meaning and purpose in life after the sexual trauma and refine or renegotiate their individual and social identity constructively.

Limitations of this Study

First, the present study uses a small sample size of male victims in a specific conflict-affected area in the DRC, which limits its generalizability. Although the study doesn't claim generalizability, (Gilmore, 1990) research on masculinity worldwide found that many cultures around the world exhibit similar concepts of masculinity that include aggression, avoidance of feminine traits, risktaking, and strength-bases. However, most African cultures do not subscribe to the cultural assumptions of Western mental health treatment. Beliefs, customs, knowledge, and wisdom are often transferred through storytelling collectively instead of between a client and therapist. Group therapy can be adapted to bridge the gap between Western and African healing methods. Furthermore, "Men learn to be men in front of other men. Therefore, it is in front of other men that men can unlearn some of the more unproductive lessons about manhood and relearn and reinforce some of the more positive lessons" (Brooks, 2010). Secondly, retrospective studies are prone to recall bias or misclassification bias. To increase accuracy, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify specific details. Third, cross-language qualitative research may lead to losing

information during the translation and transcription process from Swahili to English. A back-to-back translation approach was employed to minimize discrepancies and enhance both validity and precision. Finally, bracketing assumptions were used to eliminate researcher biases that may impact the data interpretation.

Recommendations

There is minimal healing and recovery while suffering in silence. It is essential for male victims to feel seen, heard, believed, validated, and supported. It all starts with compassion and feeling the victim's pain and suffering to the point of wanting to share that burden with them. Recommendations for future studies include (a) Creating more platforms and safe spaces for male victims to voice their trauma and the impacts of it, (b) It is essential to ask victims directly about rape, (c) It is equally important to hear the voices of male survivors and contributing factors to healing to give hope and (d) Raising awareness, educating the public and service providers about male rape and how it intersects with masculine norms and rape myths. Future research will also benefit from further exploring concepts such as resilience, which (Clark, 2023) describes as a process co-facilitated by individual victims, broader systems, and interwoven dynamics or connectivity that tell stories about elements that hinder or facilitate growth and development.

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