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Contextualising the Issue of Male Rape

Although my focus is on the rape of women, I do not mean to suggest that men are not raped. The general invisibility of the problem of male rape, at least outside the prison context, may reflect the intensity of stigma attached to the crime and the homophobic reactions against its gay victims. In some respects the situation facing male rape victims today is not so different from that which faced female victims about two centuries ago.

(Estrich 1987: 108)

In recognising the invisibility of the problem of male rape, Estrich (1987) suggests accurately that this invisibility can be attributed to the stigma of male rape. Embedded in Estrich’s statement is one of the most common myths about male rape: that victims of male rape are homosexual, giving little thought to the possibility that all men can become potential victims of rape, regardless of their sexuality. This assumption is made with a view to testing it in the empirical component of this work. Additionally, Estrich’s (1987) work is used as an opening to this chapter to highlight the invisible nature of male rape and the different myths that surround it. However, it is important to note that Estrich’s work focused on female rape, as she clearly states, and it is commendable that at the time of writing, she was able to at least give recognition to the existence and hidden nature of male rape, where much other feminist research has failed to do so.

This chapter provides a framework for discussing male rape and identifies the different myths, defined by Anderson (1999) as prejudicial, stereotyped and false beliefs about rape, rape victims and perpetrators, and stereotypes; and defined by Fulcher and Scott (1999) as untrue generalisations about different social groups, that keep male rape hidden. It is argued throughout that at the root of many of these myths and stereotypes lies the gender role socialisation and, consequently, the social construction of masculinities which socialise men into strong and sexually dominant roles. As such, this
socialisation creates what Donnelly and Kenyon (1996: 448) call the ‘myth of male invulnerability’, which prevents society, including men themselves, from recognising that men do become victims of rape. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to highlight the myths and stereotypes of male rape as supported by different studies, with a view to exploring the prevalence of these in the empirical research on newspaper coverage of male rape (Chapter 5) and the police questionnaire data (Chapter 6). The effects of such myths will then be considered in light of victims’ experiences (Chapter 7).

While there has been a steady increase in academic interest in male rape over the last ten years, the development of such work in the UK is still in its early stages. More research emanates from the USA, where male rape has received wider recognition. Studies that have begun to examine male rape in the UK have used small-scale samples because of the limited number of known cases, and have mainly been clinically based.

Rape in institutions

Owing to the lack of research carried out in the UK, little is known about the incidence of male rape in UK prisons. Recent academic work has explored the nature of bullying in UK prisons, but without specific focus on rape (Ireland 2005). It is for this reason that research from the USA is discussed, although it is recognised that the situation in US prisons may differ from that in the UK, since levels of violence are generally thought to be lower in UK prisons. However, as King (1993) argues, while this may suggest lower levels of rape in UK prisons, an absence of strong empirical evidence means that such conclusions remain anecdotal. Nevertheless research based on US prisons can be used to give some indication of the nature of rape in prisons. It has been suggested that lack of research (in all prison environments) is due to the reluctance of men to report being sexually violated (Rideau and Sinclair 1982), as well as the difficulties of conducting such research within conservative institutional establishments (King 1993).

The issue of male rape was much neglected in the UK until the 1980s, when cases of male rape gained media attention. Prior to this point, male rape was being conceived as a phenomenon of prison life and it was within this institutional surrounding that its existence first gained recognition. Outside the prison environment, male rape was regarded as a violent outgrowth of the homosexual subculture. As such, in both instances it was regarded as a minority problem and one that did not require public or research interest. It was commonly assumed that male rape victims were children or young adolescents. The issue of male rape therefore remained concealed until relatively recently.

Research into rape and sexual abuse in juvenile institutions has focused on male needs to prove masculinity, suggesting that in such environments male delinquents find peer pressure strong, and the need to prove masculinity is