Determinants of Victim Blaming among Students in Sexual Violence Cases: A Case Study at Faletehan University, Indonesia

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Abstract

Victim-blaming behavior is a key factor contributing to the underreporting of sexual violence cases, including within university settings. This reflects the presence of underlying structural and cultural barriers that require further investigation. This study aims to explore the determinants of victim-blaming attitudes among students in response to sexual violence cases at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Faletehan University, in 2024. Employing a qualitative approach with a case study design, participants were selected through snowball sampling, and data were collected via in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted through data reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing, with triangulation used to enhance the credibility of findings. Ethical approval was granted by the Faletehan University Research Ethics Committee. The study involved 30 informants (8 males and 22 females) across a range of ages. Analysis revealed four primary factors associated with victim-blaming behavior: level of knowledge, socio-cultural values and norms, lecturer support, and peer support. While most students demonstrated adequate knowledge of sexual violence, their attitudes remained influenced by patriarchal norms and societal taboos surrounding sexuality. Lecturers generally provided informational support, whereas peers contributed emotional support. These findings underscore the need to strengthen gender equality education and promote open communication on campus as strategies to combat victim-blaming culture and foster a more supportive environment for survivors

Keywords: Victim blaming, Sexual violence, Causal factors of victim blaming, University students, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence against women remains a critical and pervasive issue, frequently highlighted both in social media discourse and in everyday life. Such acts encompass a wide range of behaviors, including humiliation, degradation, harassment, and physical assaults targeting an individual's body or reproductive function (Yadav, 2023). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), approximately 641 million women worldwide have experienced violence perpetrated by an intimate partner, while 6% have been assaulted by individuals outside their household. In Indonesia, data from the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) indicated a decrease in reported cases from 457,895 in the previous year to 401.975 cases of which 4,374 involved sexual violence (Hajad et al., 2025). Sexual violence emerged as the most dominant form of violence reported by service agencies, accounting for 2,363 cases. In contrast, the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) documented psychological violence as the most frequently reported, with 3,498 cases. Students constituted the majority of victims, while most

perpetrators were identified as private sector employees. Notably, the majority of sexual violence incidents were perpetrated by individuals within the victim's immediate social circle, including ex-boyfriends 550 cases, current boyfriends 462 cases, and husbands 174 cases.

According to data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (KemenPPPA) through the PPA Symphony system, there were 29.883 reported cases of violence against women and children in 2023, involving 26,161 female victims. Sexual violence was the most frequently reported form, accounting for 13,156 cases. In Banten Province, the UPTD PPA documented 1.026 cases of violence, with sexual violence comprising 528 of these cases. Most victims were female adolescents aged 13–17 years and had a high school level of education. In Serang District specifically, 86 cases of violence were recorded, with sexual violence making up 64 of those cases. The majority of victims were students 52 cases, and most were women 77 victims.

Sexual violence is also prevalent within higher education institutions. Several high-profile cases have gained public attention through social media, involving actors from various campuses such as the Rector of Pancasila University (2024), a student from the Faculty of Medicine at Andalas University (2023), members of the Student Executive Board (BEM) at the University of Indonesia (2023), a lecturer at Jenderal Soedirman University (2023), and BEM administrators at the Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Sciences, Diponegoro University (2022). However, these cases are likely only a small fraction of the incidents that actually occur in university settings.

The persistence of patriarchal norms that subordinate women, coupled with unequal power dynamics between lecturers and students, exacerbates the problem and contributes to victims' reluctance to report. A national survey by the Indonesian Judicial Research Society (2020) revealed that 57.3% of sexual violence victims chose not to report their experiences. The primary reasons cited include fear of being blamed (33.5%), feelings of shame (29%), lack of knowledge about reporting mechanisms (23.9%), and internalized guilt (18.5%). Similarly, Fabiana Meijon Fadul, as cited in Maulydia et al. (2023), emphasized the weak institutional response to sexual violence on campuses, including the lack of awareness among victims about the forms of harassment they experience. Many victims hesitate to recognize certain behaviors as sexual violence, allowing perpetrators to normalize and repeat such actions.

Victims of sexual violence are often reluctant to disclose or report their experiences due to fear of social stigma. Societal attitudes frequently place the blame on victims—criticizing their manner of dress, romantic relationships, or the location of the incident (Mas'udah, 2022). Victim-blaming manifests in various forms, including disbelief, minimization of the assault's

severity, and unfair treatment by the surrounding environment (Juli et al., 2023). Ironically, those responsible for victim-blaming are often individuals within the victim's closest social circles, including family members, friends, and even institutions where the victim resides or studies (Firmanda et al., 2023).

Gender inequality in society contributes to the negative stigmatization of women, including the belief that dressing attractively or wearing revealing clothing provokes sexual violence. As a result, victims are often blamed for the assaults they experience (Ashgarie et al., 2022). This phenomenon, known as victim blaming, refers to the act of attributing responsibility for a harmful incident to the victim, and is particularly prevalent in cases of sexual violence. Research has shown that victims not only face unjust treatment but also experience additional psychological burdens such as trauma, isolation, and emotional distress due to negative responses from their social environment (Sitohang et al., 2025). These conditions are further reinforced by patriarchal cultural norms that remain deeply embedded in many societies, where women are still perceived as subordinate or inferior to men.

Previous research has shown that victim-blaming behavior in sexual violence cases is shaped by a range of influencing factors. These factors can be broadly categorized into two main groups: internal factors, which originate from the victim herself such as age, gender, and perceived behavior during the incident and external factors, including patriarchal cultural norms, educational level, media influence, community perspectives, social environments, and prevailing myths about rape (Latra et al., 2023).Darma et al. (2022) further emphasize that a limited understanding of sexual violence is one of the primary drivers of victim-blaming attitudes. Discussions surrounding sexual issues remain taboo in many communities, which inhibits open dialogue and reduces public awareness regarding the diverse forms of sexual violence. This knowledge gap contributes to misperceptions and a lack of empathy toward victims.

Komnas Perempuan has identified more than fifteen forms of sexual violence, encompassing a wide spectrum of abuses, including rape, sexual harassment, intimidation, exploitation, trafficking for sexual purposes, forced prostitution, sexual slavery, forced marriage, forced pregnancy or abortion, forced contraception, sexual torture, and sexual control through discriminatory moral or religious norms (Nugraha et al., 2022). Despite the growing body of research on victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence, there remains a significant gap in studies that specifically examine the determinants of victim-blaming attitudes within higher education settings—particularly among students in health-related faculties, who are expected

to possess higher literacy in reproductive health and sexual violence issues (Rusyidi et al., 2016).

The novelty of this study lies in its focused exploration of student perceptions, cultural values, and forms of social support that influence victim-blaming attitudes among students at the Faculty of Health Sciences, Faletehan University. The primary aim of this research is to identify and analyze the factors associated with victim-blaming behavior in sexual violence cases within this academic context. By providing a deeper understanding of the sociocultural and cognitive factors that contribute to victim-blaming among health students, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a valuable resource for university stakeholders particularly policy makers and academic program managers in developing more effective educational strategies. These strategies are essential to fostering a safer, more inclusive campus environment for survivors of sexual violence. Moreover, this research contributes to the expansion of academic literature on victim blaming within the Indonesian context, particularly in the domain of higher education.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the phenomenon of victim-blaming in sexual violence cases among university students. A qualitative method was deemed appropriate for capturing the complexity and context-specific nature of the issue, particularly within the cultural and institutional frameworks of higher education (Abdussamad, 2021). The research was conducted at Faletehan University, Banten, between October and December 2023. Data collection took place in various campus settings, including the university counseling center, student union office, and other private locations chosen by participants to ensure confidentiality and comfort during interviews.

Participant recruitment was conducted through non-probability snowball sampling. This technique was selected due to the sensitive and stigmatized nature of the research topic, enabling researchers to reach hidden or hard-to-access populations via trusted referrals. Initial participants were asked to recommend others who possessed relevant knowledge or experiences. A total of five informants participated in the study, comprising both university staff and students. The staff informants included individuals in key administrative and academic roles such as the Vice Dean, Head of Study Program, counseling service managers, and lecturers. Student participants were purposively selected to reflect diverse perspectives on campus experiences related to sexual violence and victim-blaming.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, triangulation was employed at multiple levels including source triangulation, method triangulation, and theoretical triangulation. All research procedures adhered to ethical standards and were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Faletehan University Approval Number 441/KEPK.UF/VII/2024. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout the study.

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. This iterative process facilitated the identification of key patterns and the generation of nuanced interpretations grounded in empirical field data..

RESULTS

Table 1. Characteristic of Respondent

Informant Code	Gender	Age	Position
I1	Male	58 years	Vice Dean
I2	Female	40 years	Head of Study Program
I3	Female	36 years	Counseling Service Manager
I4	Male	38 years	Lecturer
I5	Female	21 years	Students

Table 1 presents the five key informants who participated in this study. The selection of informants was intentionally designed to capture a diverse range of perspectives on victim-blaming within the campus environment. These include representatives from university leadership, academic program management, psychological support services, teaching staff, and students. The inclusion of these varied roles ensures a comprehensive understanding of how victim-blaming is perceived and experienced across institutional levels, particularly emphasizing the student perspective as those most directly affected by day-to-day campus dynamics.

Table 2. Characteristic of Triangulation

Types of Triangulation	Implementation in Research
Source Triangulation	Informants were victims, witnesses, and relevant campus staff.
Triangulation of Methods	Data collected through in-depth interviews, limited observation, and document review
Theory Triangulation	Analysis using victimology and social constructivism approaches

The triangulation table illustrates the application of three forms of triangulation employed in this study to enhance the validity and reliability of the data. First, source triangulation was conducted by engaging multiple stakeholders namely victims, witnesses, and campus staff to capture a wide range of perspectives on victim-blaming within campus sexual assault cases. Second, method triangulation was achieved by integrating in-depth interviews, participant

observations, and document analysis, thereby enriching the contextual depth of the findings. Finally, theory triangulation was applied by utilizing both victimology and social constructivist frameworks, offering a multidimensional analytical lens to better understand the socio-cultural and psychological factors influencing victim-blaming behaviors in higher education settings.

Students' Understanding of Sexual Violence and Its Role in Victim Blaming

The majority of students understand sexual violence as an act that degrades, harasses, or touches the body without consent, and realize that it is not only physical but also verbal and online. They show empathy by providing emotional support to victims, although there are still challenges in distinguishing sexual violence from social behaviors that are considered "normal".

"There are still many students who cannot distinguish sexual jokes from harassment, especially if it is not accompanied by physical violence." (I5)

Vice deans and heads of study programs admit that education about sexual violence has not been a systematic focus in the curriculum or student activities.

"This topic has not been included in the formal education of students. So far, it has only been discussed in incidental seminars, not as part of a systematic and sustainable curriculum."(I1)

Socio-Cultural Influences: Patriarchy and the Taboo of Sex Education

Patriarchal values and the taboo of talking about sexuality are still dominant in society and on campus. This encourages victim-blaming, especially when victims are perceived as violating norms of modesty. Traditional gender roles are still strong, where men are considered superior, and women are burdened with moral responsibility for sexual violence that happens to them.

"Sometimes students themselves blame their friends who are victims, saying that their friends are too much or because of the way they dress. Even though they don't see the situation from the point of view of the victim who feels depressed." (I2)

"There are still those who think that women who do not dress openly will definitely not be harassed. This shows that the mindset of blaming the victim is still inherent among students." (I3)

The Role of Lecturer Support in Shaping Student Responses

Support from lecturers is very important in creating a sense of security for victims. Although most students felt a positive impact from the role of lecturers, there were also negative experiences due to blaming comments. Socialization on sexual violence is still minimal, and information on reporting procedures is not evenly distributed.

"There are lecturers who care and help students tell their stories or report, but there are also those who make victim-blaming comments, such as questioning why the victim was at the scene." (I4)

The vice dean emphasized that not all lecturers have been equipped with knowledge or

guidelines in dealing with reports of sexual violence.

"We need to hold special training for lecturers so that they know how to respond to sexual violence cases wisely and without judgment. Don't let their attitude make victims even more afraid to talk." (I1)

Peer Support as a Buffer Against Victim Blaming

Peers play an important role as a source of emotional support for victims of sexual violence. They can be a shield from victim blaming, but also have the potential to worsen the victim's condition if they spread stigma or misinformation. Therefore, gender literacy and collective awareness among students are needed to create a safe and supportive campus environment. On the other hand, structural support such as campus counseling services are available, but not widely utilized. One of the reasons is the lack of socialization and the victim's fear of social and institutional stigma.

"Friends can be the first port of call for victims, but not all friends can be trusted. Some actually spread the story or accuse the victim of causing the problem." (I5)

"Many don't know counseling services can help with cases like this. They are afraid of being blamed or being seen as embarrassing the institution." (I3)

DISCUSSION

Students' Understanding of Sexual Violence and Its Role in Victim Blaming

Students' understanding of sexual violence is a critical factor influencing their responses to victims, including the tendency to engage in victim-blaming. The findings of this study reveal that most informants possess a basic conceptual understanding of sexual violence and its various forms, such as rape, verbal harassment, catcalling, and online-based sexual abuse. This aligns with the findings of Darma et al. (2022), who emphasize that conceptual clarity regarding sexual violence is essential in fostering victim-supportive attitudes.

However, the study also identified a gap between knowledge and behavior. While students may understand the definitions and forms of sexual violence, this awareness has not been fully internalized into attitudes or translated into consistent action. Some students still perceive certain behaviors such as verbal harassment or catcalling as normal or trivial, indicating that knowledge alone may be insufficient to challenge deeply rooted cultural norms.

This study also revealed that some students struggle to distinguish between forms of sexual violence and ordinary social interactions, particularly when the behavior does not involve physical contact. This finding reinforces the results of Pinchevsky et al. (2020), which highlight that students often fail to recognize non-physical forms of sexual violence—such as sexually suggestive comments, intrusive questions, or harassing gestures—as violations.

This lack of literacy in identifying subtle or non-contact forms of sexual violence contributes to the normalization of such behavior. As a consequence, students may exhibit diminished empathy toward victims, or even engage in victim-blaming, due to the perception that the incident was not serious or did not constitute a violation of personal rights.

This limited understanding is closely linked to the absence of comprehensive sex education grounded in gender equality principles. Students who lack formal education on this subject often fail to grasp critical concepts such as consent and the dynamics of gender-based power relations. Consequently, they are more susceptible to adopting victim-blaming attitudes, particularly when victims are perceived as deviating from prevailing social norms. Rohim et al. (2023) and Sulastri et al. (2024) emphasize that sex education rooted in values of equality and human rights is essential for fostering collective awareness and survivor-supportive responses. In this context, integrating comprehensive, equality-based sex education into higher education curricula becomes a vital step toward cultivating an academic environment that is not only safe and inclusive but also actively resists the normalization of victim-blaming culture.

Socio-Cultural Influences: Patriarchy and the Taboo of Sex Education

Socio-cultural values continue to exert a strong influence on students' perceptions of sexual violence, particularly in reinforcing tendencies toward victim-blaming. The findings of this study indicate that issues related to sexuality remain taboo in many student environments—especially among those from families or regions with conservative socio-cultural backgrounds. This cultural taboo hinders open dialogue about sexual violence and limits students' critical understanding of victims' rights and the broader implications of such acts.

Supporting this observation, Payne et al. (2024) found that parents are generally reluctant to engage in early conversations about sex education, a hesitation that contributes to persistently low levels of sexual literacy among children into adulthood. As a result, many students enter university without the foundational knowledge or critical framework needed to interpret and respond empathetically to sexual violence.

In addition to cultural taboos, the influence of patriarchal norms remains deeply embedded in student perceptions of sexual violence. Many students raised in patriarchal environments tend to believe that women bear moral responsibility for the violence they experience particularly when such incidents are perceived as violations of societal norms of modesty. This belief is rooted in structurally unequal power relations between men and women. Ortner (2022) argues that patriarchy is not confined to the familial domain, but is also systematically reproduced across broader social institutions, including schools and university settings. Students exposed to these values are more susceptible to victim-blaming attitudes, often viewing victims as

having 'invited' violence through their clothing, behavior, or perceived sexual openness.

Consequently, patriarchal culture and the lack of comprehensive sex education mutually reinforce harmful social narratives that blame victims and implicitly justify perpetrators' actions. Existing studies have also shown that sexual violence on university campuses is often not perpetrated through overt physical force, but rather occurs in contexts where the victim is rendered vulnerable—for instance, under the influence of alcohol or drugs. In such cases, female students frequently refrain from reporting the incidents to university authorities due to fear, stigma, or lack of trust in institutional support systems (Makhaye et al., 2023).

These findings underscore the persistence of a victim-blaming culture and the absence of structural safety mechanisms for women in higher education environments. To address this, a comprehensive and transformative approach is urgently needed one that integrates inclusive, gender-sensitive sex education and strengthens institutional frameworks for prevention, reporting, and victim support. Such reforms are essential not only to challenge prevailing myths and stigmas, but also to foster a campus culture that upholds dignity, equity, and justice for all students.

The Role of Lecturer Support in Shaping Student Responses

Lecturer support plays a critical role in fostering a sense of safety for student victims of sexual violence and significantly influences their willingness to report incidents and continue their education with confidence. This study reveals that students feel more comfortable and empowered when lecturers demonstrate empathy, actively listen, and offer themselves as safe and nonjudgmental points of consultation. Conversely, when lecturers respond with judgment or blame, it reinforces negative stigma and exacerbates the victim's psychological distress. As highlighted by Taccini et al. (2023), emotional and social support from authoritative figures such as lecturers can substantially aid in the recovery process and help alleviate feelings of guilt commonly associated with victim-blaming.

While some lecturers incorporate discussions of sexual violence into formal teaching sessions, such information is rarely conveyed outside the classroom, resulting in students' limited understanding of the topic. One important aspect of social support that lecturers can provide is informational support offering advice, guidance, and feedback related to sexual violence, including reporting procedures and student rights. Strengthening this form of support both within and beyond the classroom context can contribute meaningfully to students' literacy on the issue and foster a safer, more responsive academic environment.

Peer Support as a Buffer Against Victim Blaming

Peer support plays a vital role in shaping students' attitudes toward survivors of sexual violence. Findings from this study indicate that many students exhibit empathy by actively listening, offering encouragement, and assisting in the reporting process. Such behaviors foster a psychologically supportive environment that facilitates recovery. However, the impact of peer support is often gendered. Previous studies have demonstrated that female students are more likely to provide positive emotional and informational support than their male counterparts. Moreover, social networks among women can create a cascading effect of solidarity, as observed by Pinciotti et al. (2021), highlighting the value of gender-based peer networks on campus.

Nevertheless, peer support is not uniformly positive. In certain cases, survivors were ostracized or blamed by their peers due to persisting rape myths and inadequate understanding of sexual violence. This underscores the powerful influence of peer dynamics both in reinforcing stigma and in facilitating support. Kazmi et al. (2023) found that low acceptance of rape myths correlates with stronger support for survivors, and that individuals with higher education levels, liberal views, or direct or indirect experiences with sexual violence are more likely to hold empathetic attitudes. These findings confirm that supportive behaviors are not innate but are socially and educationally cultivated.

To ensure that peer support becomes both transformative and protective, institutions must invest in capacity building and gender literacy initiatives. Universities should promote structured peer mentoring systems that not only offer emotional support but also function as a counterbalance to victim-blaming narratives. Such programs must address rape myths, challenge gender biases, and cultivate critical perspectives on consent and bodily autonomy.

This study also found variation in victim-blaming attitudes based on gender, geographic origin, and exposure to sex education. Female students tended to express greater empathy, while some male students held neutral or accusatory stances, particularly concerning the victim’s clothing or social behavior. Urban-based students were more open to gender equality and demonstrated higher awareness, whereas those from rural areas were often influenced by conservative socio-cultural norms. Exposure to sex education was a strong predictor of supportive attitudes students who received comprehensive, consent-based education were more likely to respect victim rights and reject harmful stereotypes.

These patterns are consistent with Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that dominant male ideologies are reproduced through cultural and institutional systems that legitimize male control over women. Within this framework, victim blaming is not merely

an individual response but a social manifestation of patriarchal power that seeks to normalize violence and delegitimize women's experiences. Statements that focus on the victim's clothing or behavior reflect deeply internalized gender hierarchies that position men as rational agents and women as morally suspect objects.

In conclusion, student perceptions and responses to sexual violence are shaped by a confluence of factors knowledge, gender norms, cultural context, and institutional discourse. Addressing this issue requires more than awareness campaigns; it calls for systemic and context-sensitive educational interventions that confront patriarchal structures and challenge hegemonic masculinities. Universities are uniquely positioned to drive this change by embedding gender-sensitive pedagogy into the curriculum, fostering inclusive dialogue, and building support systems that affirm the dignity and agency of survivors.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that victim blaming among university students is influenced by four main factors: limited knowledge about sexual violence, internalization of deep-rooted patriarchal cultural norms, uneven and sometimes biased support from lecturers, and diverse peer roles-both as a support system and as a spreader of stigma. These factors work intersectionally and reinforce social practices that do not favor victims.

Although most students demonstrated a conceptual understanding of the forms and impacts of sexual violence, this knowledge was not always directly proportional to empathetic attitudes or defense of victims. There is a gap between cognitive awareness and behavioral response, reflecting the strong influence of conservative social values and gender-based power relations in shaping students' perceptions and actions towards sexual violence cases.

Based on these findings, it is recommended: One, the systematic integration of gender equality-based sex education into the campus curriculum to build understanding and critical attitudes towards sexual violence. Second, training for lecturers and educators to equip them to provide appropriate and non-judgmental support to victims. Third, strengthening a victim-friendly reporting system, with clear, safe mechanisms that prioritize confidentiality and psychological assistance. Fourth, the development of peer support programs that encourage solidarity and active intervention from students in creating an inclusive campus environment free from sexual violence. These efforts are expected to reduce the practice of victim blaming, strengthen support for survivors, and form a campus culture that is more just and responsive to the issue of gender-based violence.

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