

## Sexual violence and the healing process of the victims

### *Kekerasan seksual dan proses penyembuhan para korban*

Priyono Tri Febrianto<sup>1✉</sup>, Aditya Dyah Puspitasari<sup>1</sup>, Ade Cyntia Pritasari<sup>1</sup>, Nilamsari Damayanti Fajrin<sup>1</sup>, Siti Mas'udah<sup>2</sup>, & Lutfi Apreliana Megasari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Elementary Education, Faculty of Education Science,  
Universitas Trunojoyo Madura  
Bangkalan, 69162, East Java Province, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga  
Surabaya, 60286, East Java Province, Indonesia

E-mail of corresponding author: priyono.febrianto@trunojoyo.ac.id

#### Abstract

Sexual violence can occur anywhere and anytime. It can cause the victim to have prolonged trauma. This article aimed to examine the experiences of victims or survivors of sexual violence and to find out the healing process they carried out. This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach by interviewing 377 respondents. According to the findings of this study, sexual violence has various impacts on victims, including shame, low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, and a desire to retaliate against the perpetrator. Fears that arise as a result of sexual violence include the fear of getting pregnant, contracting sexually transmitted diseases, sin, and feeling inferior. As a healing process, the victims engaged in a variety of activities ranging from worship to favorite activities to reduce trauma. This study concludes that the healing process is significant for victims, with the aim of accelerating both physical and psychological recovery.

**Keywords:** healing process; sexual violence; traumatic experiences; victims of sexual violence

#### Abstrak

*Kekerasan seksual bisa terjadi dimana saja dan kapan saja. Hal ini dapat menyebabkan korban mengalami trauma berkepanjangan. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji pengalaman para korban atau penyintas kekerasan seksual dan untuk mengetahui proses penyembuhan yang mereka lakukan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kuantitatif dengan mewawancarai 377 responden. Menurut temuan penelitian ini, kekerasan seksual memiliki berbagai dampak terhadap korban, antara lain rasa malu, rendah diri, perasaan rendah diri, dan keinginan untuk membalas dendam kepada pelaku. Ketakutan yang muncul akibat kekerasan seksual antara lain takut hamil, tertular penyakit menular seksual, berdosa, dan minder. Sebagai proses penyembuhan, para korban melakukan berbagai kegiatan mulai dari ibadah hingga kegiatan favorit untuk mengurangi trauma. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa proses penyembuhan sangat penting bagi korban, dengan tujuan untuk mempercepat pemulihan baik fisik maupun psikologis.*

**Kata kunci:** proses penyembuhan; kekerasan seksual; pengalaman traumatis; korban kekerasan seksual

## Introduction

Sexual violence is both a crime and a violation of human rights. It was declared as a crime against humanity and a threat to global peace and security by the United Nations in 2007. It is the threat and insecurity that most affects women (Meger 2016). Victims of sexual violence are not only women but can also be men. However, women are subjects who are vulnerable to sexual violence anywhere. In addition, sexual violence is a serious problem that occurs everywhere. It includes a range of behaviors such as attempted or completed rape, sexual coercion, unwanted contact, and unwanted non-contact experiences like harassment (Dills et al. 2016, Smith et al., 2018, Smith et al. 2017). Many of these actions take place in public spaces such as modes of transportation, schools, stadiums, and even in private spaces where families are involved.

Ward et al. (2018) stated that sexual violence occurs in many countries, including South Africa where sexual violence is considered common and there is no adequate legal umbrella, making women and children the most vulnerable. Countries in the African continent face significant challenges in addressing the issue of sexual violence. The incidence of sexual violence in many countries around the world is also inextricably linked to the culture and social life of people who consider sexual harassment not a serious problem. Furthermore, many countries worldwide do not have a full awareness of the significance of preventing and stopping sexual violence. Meanwhile, activists for gender equality and international organizations continue to seek security for anyone to avoid the threat of sexual violence.

Sexual violence also has a serious impact. Previous studies have found that sexual violence has a fairly severe impact, particularly on mental health, depressive symptoms, and severe PTSD symptoms (Khalifeh et al. 2016, Anderson et al. 2016, Catabay et al. 2019). Individuals who have been victims of sexual violence discover the impact is complex, both physically and psychologically. Generally, they feel uncomfortable, which causes traumatic symptoms to appear. Furthermore, the risk of physical impacts such as physical injuries including bruises, bleeding, minor or serious injuries, and infection with sexually transmitted diseases becomes a serious problem. Victims of sexual violence will experience physical and psychological pain if they do not receive proper treatment.

Meanwhile, the study by Rustad et al. (2016) mentioned that sexual violence is not only caused by individual factors but is also influenced by the system; for example, in conflict areas, people are more vulnerable to sexual violence. Conflict areas are not only not universally safe for life, but the security of women and men is particularly jeopardized by sexual violence attacks. Refugees are among those who are especially vulnerable to this. Furthermore, women and children are groups of people who require complete protection. Previous studies have also revealed that sexual violence that receives little attention is the sexual violence that occurred in Iraq and Syria by ISIS. Sexual violence by ISIS is a form of invasion of territory and power (Al-Ali 2016, Foster & Minwalla 2018, Kaya 2019). For belligerent groups, "controlling" territory by raping women is a critical effort to weaken the enemy or opponents. In this case, sexual violence cannot be avoided because the safe space for victims is extremely limited.

Sexual violence is driven by a variety of factors. It is not just an individual's personal desire to attack others; there are other factors as well, such as culture and tradition. According to Phipps's (2019) study, in the West, the resistance movement against sexual violence began with Black women's resistance, where cases of sexual violence frequently occur as a result of cultural prejudice and racism. Racism against Black people as a result of White supremacy leads to sexual violence against Black women. Cultural perspectives also influence people's mindsets, making violations of human rights more likely. Meanwhile, sexual violence has become normalized in the United States under President Trump and is being countered by gender activists with social movements tagged with hashtags #MeToo, #tiMesup, #stopKavanaugh, and #MuteRKelly (Gash & Harding 2018, Battaglia et al. 2019, Hinds & Fileborn 2019). This resistance is a reaction from gender activists to conservative views that remain deeply ingrained in the United States. During Trump's presidency, there were many resistances that arose as a result of socio-political policies that were considered less favorable to liberals.

In the public sphere, such as on public transportation, perpetrators of sexual violence tend to attack victims on the spur of the moment. This is commonly done through whistling, sexual glances, fingering, unexpected kissing, or flirting. Meanwhile, sexual violence in the private sphere is typically carried out with forethought. Rossetto & Tollison (2017) mentioned that sexual violence is generally perpetrated by a known perpetrator, in a regulated room, with alcohol, without a weapon, and with minimal physical strength, so that the victim is easily manipulated. Sexual violence committed by friends, girlfriends, husbands, or even family members is usually premeditated in order to weaken the victim. Victims are rendered defenseless and powerless to fight. This cannot be separated from feelings of fear because the perpetrator is a known person. Therefore, in cases of sexual violence are difficult to find social justice, making social movements on various social media platforms emerge as a form of resistance (Mendes et al. 2018, Jackson et al. 2019, Masciantonio et al. 2021).

The healing process for victims of sexual violence tends to take a long time because this is indeed an extremely complex problem. WHO (2017) stated that sexual violence can harm victims' health in both the short and long term, in the short and long term. Victims' health risks include sexual, reproductive, and mental health. At first, victims of sexual violence appear normal. However, in the long run, there will be more visible symptoms indicating that the impact of sexual violence must be taken seriously. In general, the serious impact is on the victim's mental state. Victims of sexual assault are often haunted by feelings of guilt, disgust, and fear as a result of the trauma.

Today's sexual violence, on the other hand, can occur not only directly but also through the cyber world. The widespread use of social media has resulted in an increase in sexual violence attacks. According to previous studies, the sexual violence experienced by female students was cyber violence that harassed women (Cripps & Stermac 2018, Pashang et al. 2018, Paat 2019). Cybersexual violence often occurs on various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, and even the latest social media, Onlyfans, is also vulnerable to online sexual violence attacks.

There have been numerous studies on sexual violence. This article aimed to examine the experiences of sexual violence victims and their healing process. Victims' interpretations of sexual violence need to be investigated to see their perspectives on how to interpret sexual violence. Furthermore, studies of the healing process following sexual violence that have been socially researched have not been widely carried out. Therefore, this article seeks to delve deeper and serve as a reference for the development of science in the future.

## Research Method

This study employed a quantitative approach. This method is utilized to obtain information and data regarding the general picture including the respondents' feelings and thoughts when harassed, the fear that arises after experiencing sexual violence, and the healing process that victims go through after experiencing sexual violence.

Respondents in this study were 377 women and men who had experienced sexual violence and were students in East Java. They consisted of 54 men and 323 women who were chosen by availability sampling. In this study, 0.5% of the total respondents were 17 years old, 23.9% were 18 years old, 47.2% were 19 years old, 25.2% were 20 years old, and 3.2% were 21 years old.

Data was collected by interviewing respondents using an instrument in the form of a questionnaire containing a list of structured questions. The type of this study was descriptive. The data was processed in the form of frequency tables. Data analysis was carried out by comparing and contrasting data with previous studies that are relevant to the research topic being studied.

## Results and Discussion

This section describes the respondents' feelings when harassed, thoughts when harassed, the fear that arises after experiencing sexual violence, and the healing process carried out by victims after experiencing sexual violence. This study shows that the victims' traumatic experience of sexual violence is not only physical but can also be verbal, such as sexual harassment. This study reveals that the most common forms of sexual harassment experienced by the victims are whistling, teasing, and comments about the victims' appearance. Sexual harassment and violence in society have been going on for a long time and are like an iceberg on the seabed. Sexual harassment such as whistles, temptations, and negative comments about the appearance of the victim is frequently observed in public places. In this case, women are more susceptible to sexual harassment than men. Comments that lead to women's physical appearance are more commonly found in public places.

The most recent incident that occurred in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan involved a police officer as a perpetrator and an intern student as a victim. The violence occurred when the victim was invited to walk alongside the perpetrator. The perpetrator provided food and drink that had been mixed with sleeping pills. This mode was used to deceive the victim. This fact demonstrates that there is no safe haven for anyone from the crime of sexual violence.

The places most vulnerable to sexual violence or sexual harassment are public transportation, streets, schools, and homes. These locations appear to have been used by perpetrators to carry out the mode of violence against the victim. The risk of being a victim of sexual harassment is extremely high when using public transportation. In a train, for example, the victim and perpetrator are very close, allowing the perpetrator to carry out his/her action. Victims of abuse are frequently hesitant to fight back due to fear, shock, and shame. Perpetrators of sexual harassment can do anything, including unexpectedly hugging a nearby victim. In addition, pedestrian bridges, sidewalks, and roads are also targets for sexual crimes. Sexual crimes are also committed on pedestrian bridges, sidewalks, and roads. Conditions at night, when it is dark and lonely, become highly dangerous, especially for women. Furthermore, the incidence of breast robbery is rife in various places, targeting female motorcyclists at night.

The study conducted by Gekoski et al. (2017) stated that perpetrators of sexual harassment on public transportation include obscene comments, mock, sexual solicitation, displaying pornographic material, being followed or photographed, and masturbating in public. These things are mostly done by random people who have a habit of doing them in public places. They make no distinction based on the victim's gender, but women are far more vulnerable to receiving inappropriate treatment. Meanwhile, sexual harassment continues to occur in many countries, including developed countries, as public transportation modes increase (Veenema et al. 2015, Bhattacharyya 2015, Gardner et al. 2017). Unfortunately, the increase in public transportation modes has not been accompanied by increased protection for victims of violence and sexual harassment, so it remains prevalent.

Women with disabilities are also vulnerable to harassment on public transportation (Ramdhani 2017). Because women with disabilities have limitations and a limited range of movement, the gap between sexual crimes in public places is quite extensive. Even though a safe room has been provided, such as a priority room, this cannot guarantee the safety of people with disabilities. Previous research has also shown that sexual harassment can occur in both conventional and online modes of transportation (Rusyidi et al. 2019, Makmuri 2020, Mariana & Daya 2020).

**Table 1.**  
Victims' feelings when harassed

No	Victims' feelings when harassed	Yes		No		Total
		F	%	f	%	
1	Embarrassed	335	88.9%	42	11.1%	377/100%
2	Hurt self-esteem	331	87.8%	46	12.2%	377/100%
3	Feeling inferior	299	79.3%	78	20.7%	377/100%
4	Wishing to avenge the perpetrator	230	61%	147	39%	377/100%

Source: Primary data

Table 1 shows that victims experienced a range of emotions following the occurrence of sexual violence. Individual victims of sexual violence cannot avoid feelings of shame (88.9 percent). This is triggered by the bad experiences they had. Victims of sexual violence frequently feel bad about themselves in the eyes of others, so they tend to be quiet. Feelings of being rejected by the community can sometimes arise, affecting the victim's psychological state. Victims of sexual violence also feel hurt. They experience not only physical pain but also psychological distress. For female victims, an individual's self-esteem as a dignified woman feels taken away by unexpected events.

The study conducted by Ferdowsian et al. (2016) stated that survivors of sexual violence feel ashamed because they believe they are in the minority of the general population. They are also afraid of social

rejection. This sense of shame makes it difficult for victims of sexual violence to interact with the wider community. This feeling is the impact of the social discourse that has been built that being a victim of sexual violence is unacceptable in society. Meanwhile, victims who are embarrassed are less likely to report their cases to the police. They claim that nothing can be changed, and they live in social isolation (Kelly et al. 2012, Reina et al. 2014, Thaggard & Montayre 2019).

Women feel ashamed and constrained among neighbors, family, and others. Sometimes, they ask or comment publicly about the chronology of violence, which reinforces women’s shame (dos Reis et al. 2016). Victims of sexual violence who attempt to erase the memory of a crime are frequently forced by the community to share their experiences. This makes them feel hemmed in, and their privacy is not respected. Meanwhile, previous studies found that female victims of sexual violence with low incomes felt more ashamed and depressed because they lacked the power to fight back (Solangon & Patel 2012, Fleming & Kruger 2013, Tankink 2013). It is in contrast to victims from the upper-middle class who have direct access to file complaints, legal processes, and rehabilitation.

Meanwhile, this study further sorts out 377 respondents who are victims of sexual violence, then selects the categories of victims of sexual violence committed by their boyfriends or husbands. In reality, sexual violence can happen to loved ones as well. Table 2 depicts the thoughts of sexual violence victims when harassed by their boyfriends or husbands. As many as 7.7% of victims believe that sexual violence by their boyfriend or husband is normal, and they are frequently in denial because the violence was perpetrated by a loved one. Meanwhile, 23.1% of the victims reported that their boyfriend or husband still loved them despite committing sexual violence. 13.4% of victims reported that their boyfriend or husband is their future, 17.3% of victims said they still love their partner, and 38.5% of victims intend to report their partner.

**Table 2.**  
Respondents’ thoughts when harassed by their boyfriend/husband

No.	Respondents’ thoughts when harassed by their boyfriend/husband	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	It is acceptable	4	7.7
2	He still loves me	12	23.1
3	He is my future	7	13.4
4	I still love him	9	17.3
5	I need to report him	20	38.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>52</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Primary data

It cannot be denied that some people make it normal for their partner to be sexually assaulted. Victims who hold this viewpoint are almost certainly motivated by feelings of love and the desire to maintain a relationship or marriage. For married women, maintaining a marriage is an action that needs to be really worked on. They do not care if they are labeled as victims; they continue to insist that what their husbands do is not excessive violence. Meanwhile, some women who were harassed by their boyfriends did not intend to end the relationship because they believed that their boyfriend would be their future, which needed to be worked on in order for them to marry in the future.

The study of Mathur et al. (2018) found that sexual violence committed by partners was mostly experienced by women aged 20 to 24 years. Household conditions that are not yet fully stabilized are vulnerable to acts of sexual violence. Violence can be caused by a variety of factors, ranging from emotional to financial. Meanwhile, previous research concluded that sexual violence committed by a boyfriend or husband is typically rape (Dartnall & Jewkes 2013, Kunnuji & Eiset 2015, Shimekaw et al. 2013). Incidents of being raped by a boyfriend or husband occur frequently, but due to the belief that having sexual activity with a boyfriend or husband without the consent of one of the parties cannot be considered a form of rape, it is not considered a form of rape.

In individuals who are not married, rape committed by a boyfriend is commonly motivated by the desire to try sex and be the result of promiscuity. Sexual violence perpetrated by boyfriends is caused by unstable adolescent emotions as well as the influence of communication media and technology (Harmadi & Diana 2020). In today's digital era, the potential for sexual violence may increase due to the influence of communication technology. Furthermore, sexual violence in dating occurs as a result of a power imbalance between men and women. Violence occurs when the perpetrator tries to persuade the victim (Ayu et al. 2012, Sari 2018, Farid 2019).

Table 2 shows that some victims of sexual violence recognized that what they had gone through was unfair. A total of 38.5% of victims intend to report their partners' actions. In this case, it demonstrates that the victim is keenly aware of the situation and wishes to end the relationship. They try to escape the toxic love zone.

Experiencing sexual harassment and violence makes victims experience excessive fear. The social sanctions imposed by the community exacerbate their fear. Table 3 depicts as many as 34.7% of victims admitted that they were afraid of getting pregnant. Pregnancy is not something the victims would want. Meanwhile, 35.5% of victims expressed concern about being infected with infectious diseases. Violence and sexual harassment by sexual predators make victims feel afraid if they are infected with a serious disease. HIV/AIDS is a disease that victims of sexual violence are very afraid of. Meanwhile, 58.9% of victims are afraid of sin. This refers to religious teachings, such as the belief in Islam that sexual activity outside of marriage is a sin, and 61.8% of victims admit to being afraid of feelings of inferiority.

**Table 3.**  
The fear that arises after experiencing sexual violence

No	The fear that arises after experiencing sexual violence	Yes		No		Total
		f	%	f	%	
1	Fear of getting pregnant	131	34.7%	246	65.3%	<b>377/100%</b>
2	Fear of contracting sexually transmitted diseases	134	35.5%	243	64.5%	<b>377/100%</b>
3	Fear of sin	222	58.9%	155	41.1%	<b>377/100%</b>
4	Feeling inferior	233	61.8%	144	38.2%	<b>377/100%</b>

Source: Primary data

Fear of feeling inferior is a common feeling experienced by victims of sexual assault. The reason for being unvirtuous, dirty, being groped is a common fear experienced by victims. Sometimes they feel that they will never be accepted by society because they made a fatal mistake. Unmarried victims often think of themselves as worthless girls. Pregnancy, on the other hand, is a fear felt by victims, particularly rape victims. To avoid a possible pregnancy, they usually take laxatives, drink cassava tapai juice, or eat young pineapples.

Unwanted pregnancies caused by sexual violence can lead to depression, anxiety, stress disorders, and suicidal ideation in victims (Chisholm et al. 2017). Feelings of guilt and being unable to accept the conditions make victims of sexual violence vulnerable to psychological problems. As was the case with Novia Widyasari, she took her own life as a result of the sexual violence she endured. According to previous research, pregnancy as a result of rape is a double taboo. The victim not only feels pain, guilt, shame, and anger as a result of the sexual assault, but she also has to deal with the real consequences of what happened, namely the unborn baby in her belly (de Haas et al. 2012, Altinyelken & Le Mat 2017, Bessa et al. 2019).

A study conducted by Zahirah et al. (2019) stated that victims of sexual violence who were pregnant tend to isolate themselves and are hesitant to continue their education. They eventually chose to drop out of school. The behavior of closing oneself off from the environment is because the victim of sexual violence is shy enough to face questions from the public, especially if the victim is pregnant. Previous studies also stated that abortion was used to protect the mental health of victims who became pregnant as

a result of sexual violence, but it required the approval of authorities to do so (Abdullah 2015, Ramadani 2017, Ariyani et al. 2018). This is what causes the victim to become even more depressed.

**The healing process carried out by victims of sexual violence**

Dealing with a bad and traumatic experience necessitates efforts to prevent fear and suppress deepening trauma feelings. Victims of sexual violence have various ways to protect themselves physically and psychologically as a result of the sexual violence they have endured. This healing process is carried out alone in order to suppress the mind and keep it from becoming overly stressed. Table 4 depicts that 80.1% of victims stated that they increased their worship to get closer to God. Victims’ feelings of shame, sin, and low self-esteem motivate them to improve their worship activities. 51.2% of victims did refreshing to reduce the burden of thoughts they experience. Meanwhile, 59.2% of victims took part in religious studies, 38.5% of victims told other people about their problems, 34.2% of victims participated in sports, and 60.2% of victims engaged in hobbies.

**Table 4**  
The healing process carried out by victims after experiencing sexual violence

No.	The healing process after experiencing sexual violence	Yes		No		Total
		f	%	f	%	
1	Improving worship	302	80.1%	75	19.9%	<b>377/100%</b>
2	Refreshing	193	51.2%	184	48.8%	<b>377/100%</b>
3	Participating in religious studies	223	59.2%	154	40.8%	<b>377/100%</b>
4	Talking about the problems to others	145	38.5%	232	61.5%	<b>377/100%</b>
5	Participating in sports	122	32.4%	255	67.6%	<b>377/100%</b>
6	Engaged in hobbies	227	60.2%	150	39.8%	<b>377/100%</b>

Source: Primary data

Table 4 shows that the victim participates in a variety of activities as part of the healing process. Most of them participated in activities to increase worship. The victim hopes to be healed both physically and psychologically by praying. Feelings of regret and guilt further encourage victims to be more active in worship. Furthermore, many victims choose to keep themselves busy with hobbies. They can forget their bad experiences by engaging in hobbies as frequently as possible, even if they are not necessarily happy. However, victims feel better because they are busy doing a fun job. Making cakes, cooking dishes, painting, and even cycling are all activities that can help relieve stress and burdens.

The victim’s mental and psychological condition can gradually improve by continuing to engage in enjoyable activities. Crews et al. (2016) discovered that yoga is an effective exercise for survivors of sexual violence in their study. Yoga connects the physical and the brain, as well as the sensory systems of the individual, allowing it to overcome pain and trauma. Sexual assault survivors can organize their thoughts and energy by practicing yoga. They can relax as a result of the sport. Furthermore, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role in the healing process for survivors of sexual violence by providing assistance and full support from peers (Zongwe 2012, Edström & Dolan 2018, Clark 2019). Survivors of sexual violence must be fully assisted in restoring their condition, particularly psychologically, as well as receiving legal justice.

Sexual violence must be healed as soon as possible so that it does not have a long-term impact (Noviana 2015). The problem is that in some cases of sexual violence, a case emerges years after the incident. The victims were unable to speak up and report the cases of violence that they experienced, resulting in deep trauma. According to previous research, rehabilitation aims to accelerate the healing process because it is supported by an extremely supportive environment. Rehabilitation provides a comfortable space for survivors of sexual violence (Simarmata 2013, Wulandari & Kharismawan 2020, Roring et al. 2020).

## Conclusion

Sexual violence has various impacts on victims. Sexual violence cannot be tolerated by some of them because it violates their dignity. A small number of them remain tolerant because the violence is perpetrated by their husbands and boyfriends. Victims of sexual violence often feel ashamed and have low self-esteem as a result of their bad experiences. Perpetrators of sexual violence crimes have stripped an individual's dignity. Some of the victims intend to avenge the criminal behavior.

Victims of sexual violence perceive sexual violence as causing them to feel depressed and traumatized. As a result, the victims have developed their own methods of self-healing. The healing process accelerates reducing trauma and psychological pain. There needs to be an effort from the government, universities, private parties, communities, communities, and families to address sexual violence and provide protection for victims.

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