



# Myths and Facts:

## Sexual assault

### MYTH

**Lots of sexual assault claims are false.**

### FACT

**Nearly three quarters of Australians are aware of this myth, but there are still people who agree with this statement, or who don't know if lots of claims are false, when, indeed, most claims of sexual assault are true.**

The fact is that, based on the evidence, it is estimated that less than 10 percent of all reports to police are for false allegations: the rate of false allegations of sexual assault is as low, if not lower, than for other offences .

Rather, research suggests that:

- sexual assault is under-reported particularly when compared with reporting of other offences
- women are not believed when they report sexual assault
- cases of sexual assault are less likely to be prosecuted or to result in a conviction.

### MYTH

**It wasn't rape if he didn't have to use physical force.**

### FACT

**There are people in Australia who think that 'if a woman doesn't physically resist – even if protesting verbally – then it isn't really rape'. Rape is a form of sexual assault: an act of a sexual nature carried out against a person's will through the use of intimidation or coercion and sometimes physical force.**

In fact, the victim is usually forced to submit, not through physical means, but through fear and other forms of psychological coercion, and weapons are rarely involved in rape situations.

People's understanding of rape has been called the 'real rape script' by researchers: that is, what many people believe about what a 'real', 'credible' or 'genuine' rape looks like (e.g. assaults by strangers in dark places, late at night etc.). Studies show that the more unlike this 'real rape script' the victim's experience is, the greater the chances that blame will be transferred from the perpetrator to the victim.

### MYTH

**Rape happens because of men not being able to control their need for sex.**

### FACT

**FACTS: About two thirds of Australians are aware that rape does not result from men not being able to control their need for sex.**

This myth is related to how some people believe that 'proper' or 'real' men and women should think, feel and act, reinforcing the idea that men should want and actively pursue sex. It's also linked with the beliefs some people still hold that there is no need for sexual relations to be based on the presence and ongoing negotiation of consent. These attitudes justify men's failure to actively gain consent as a 'natural' aspect of masculinity. In effect, the perpetrator is excused for their actions, and, in some cases, the victim is blamed for the violence occurring, or for not preventing it.



## MYTH

**Strangers are usually the people who sexually assault women.**

## FACT

**While most Australians know that women are more likely to be sexually violated by someone they know than a stranger, there has been a decline in the proportion who recognise this.**

The 2016 Personal Safety Survey shows that women who reported sexual assault were over three times more likely to have been assaulted by a person known to them than by a stranger (*Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017*). Research suggests that this familiarity with the perpetrator makes it less likely that the victim will be believed when she says that she did not consent to sex.

Instead, the perpetrator may be viewed as having misunderstood or misread her 'signals' and therefore his behaviour is seen as more tolerable than if he had behaved similarly in an encounter with a stranger.

As well, in many situations, the perpetrator may hold a position of social power over the woman and this can worsen her fear that she won't be believed, or will be somehow punished if she does report the offence.

## MYTH

**It's not a crime if a man forces his wife to have sex in this country.**

## FACT

**There's still around one in ten Australians who don't know that non-consensual sex in marriage is against the law.**

In Australia, it was assumed that, under the common law, there could be no liability for rape in marriage (marital rape immunity). This changed during the 1980s, when all Australian states and territories changed their laws. While the research is unclear about whether the law is an effective way to stop sexual violence in marriage, it is recognised that the law can strengthen social norms against violence, which then influence whether people perpetrate violence and how others around them respond to this. Research also suggests that women who are aware that violence is against the law are also less likely to blame themselves and this can help in their recovery process.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All content extracted and adapted from:

Webster, K., Diemer, K., Honey, N., Mannix, S., Mickle, J., Morgan, J., Parkes, A., Politoff, V., Powell, A., Stubbs, J., & Ward, A. (2018). *Australians' attitudes to violence against women and gender equality. Findings from the 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)* (Research report, 03/2018). Sydney, NSW: ANROWS.

**This report also contains statistics that should be used when representing facts in reports, media releases and educating other sector partners.**

You are encouraged to access the original document to learn more.



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