

Gender and Judicial Decision-Making: A Systematic Review of How Gendered Narratives Shape Judicial Reasoning

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ABSTRACT

Gendered assumptions within judicial reasoning shape how cases of sexual violence (SV) are interpreted, prosecuted, and adjudicated. This systematic review synthesizes empirical evidence on how gender stereotypes and cultural myths influence judicial and prosecutorial perceptions of adult female victims, primarily in SV cases, with limited evidence from intimate partner violence (IPV). Twenty-eight studies, with judges, prosecutors, and jury eligible mock jurors' samples were identified across five databases (PubMed, Web of Science, Medline, PsycINFO, and SCOPUS), following PRISMA guidelines. Findings suggest that gender stereotypes function as heuristic frameworks shaping the construction and discounting of victim credibility, the interpretation of evidence, and the attribution of responsibility. These patterns were most consistently observed in SV contexts, where deviations from the "ideal victim" stereotype were associated with increased victim-blaming and reduced case progression. Evidence from IPV studies, although limited, suggests distinct credibility dynamics linked to ongoing relational contexts. The review highlights the persistence of gendered biases across decision-maker types and study designs. Conclusions are therefore tempered by the heterogeneity of the evidence base and the predominance of SV research. The findings support the need for structural, procedural, and training-based interventions to reduce bias and promote more equitable judicial outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Gender-based violence; judicial bias; stereotypes; victim-blaming; judges; prosecutors; jury-eligible mocks

Introduction

Gendered assumptions in judicial reasoning play a critical role in shaping how sexual violence (SV) and intimate partner violence (IPV) cases are interpreted, prosecuted, and adjudicated. International bodies, including the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW], 2015) have highlighted persistent lack of gender awareness among legal professionals, contributing to the structural reproduction of inequality within criminal justice systems. Empirical research demonstrates that gender stereotypes are pervasive in SV and IPV cases (Dinos et al., 2015; Meloy & Miller, 2011), influencing both judicial and prosecutorial decision-making and undermining victims' credibility (Cook & Cusack, 2010; Drobak & North, 2008; Epstein & Goodman, 2019).

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A prominent example is the phenomenon of “credibility discounting,” whereby female victims who deviate from the culturally constructed “ideal victim” stereotype are met with skepticism and are often disbelieved or judged morally (Araya, 2020; Jerónimo, 2023; Tuerkheimer, 2017). Prosecutors, as key legal gatekeepers, anticipate how judges and juries will perceive cases, a concept described as “downstream orientation,” and may adjust charging decisions, plea bargains, and sentencing accordingly (Emerson & Paley, 1992; Frohmann, 1997; Spohn et al., 2001). Gendered assumptions also shape interpretations of victim behavior, such as delayed reporting, trauma responses (e.g., a victim not fighting back), or compliance, which are often misread as indicators of consent or unreliability (Ellison & Munro, 2009; Leverick, 2020; O’Neal et al., 2015).

Gender stereotypes, as defined by the United Nations (2020), assign roles and traits based solely on gender, reinforcing existing social hierarchies (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Koenig & Eagly, 2014; Wood & Eagly, 2010). Women are typically associated with caregiving and dependence, while men are expected to be strong and independent (Jones, 2019; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). These stereotypes intersect with age and other factors, producing differential treatment of victims (Goodman & Melinder, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2022). Adult women often face greater scrutiny, particularly when their behaviors deviate from stereotypical expectations of victim conduct (Callan et al., 2012; Sullivan et al., 2022), while children benefit from specialized forensic procedures and interviews (Goodman & Melinder, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2022).

Victim-blaming remains pervasive in gender-based crimes—for example, reinforced by rape myths (Burt, 1980; Timmer & Norman, 1984), culturally embedded beliefs that justify male aggression and shift responsibility onto victims. This systemic bias not only affects perceptions of individual victims but also shapes broader institutional outcomes (Dinos et al., 2015; Leverick, 2020), contributing to unequal access to justice and the reproduction of gendered power relations within legal systems (Crenshaw, 1991; Hohl & Stanko, 2015; MacKinnon, 1989; Meloy & Miller, 2011; Murray et al., 2023; Murvartian et al., 2023).

Given these patterns, this systematic review examines how gender stereotypes shape legal decision-making in cases involving adult women victims of gender crimes. Existing research on gender bias in legal contexts has predominantly focused on SV, particularly within experimental and juror-based paradigms, whereas research on IPV has more often emphasized relational dynamics and broader social contexts rather than judicial decision-making processes (e.g., Epstein & Goodman, 2019; O’Neal et al., 2015; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). IPV is nevertheless included due to its theoretical relevance, particularly regarding how ongoing relational dynamics may shape credibility assessments, although its empirical representation within this domain appears more limited.

The review integrates findings from studies involving judges, prosecutors, and where relevant, jury-eligible mock jurors as experimental proxies for lay decision-makers, while recognizing the differences in ecological validity across these groups. The objectives are to (1) analyze how legal actors construct and evaluate victim credibility and (2) identify the gendered assumptions influencing legal outcomes. By mapping how these assumptions interact with evidentiary, procedural, and professional factors, this review aims to provide a theoretically grounded and empirically constrained framework for understanding gendered bias in legal decision-making.

Method

Protocol and registration

The systematic review protocol follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) and was registered on OSF Registries (reference: osf.io/zvkdj). The protocol was designed to provide a rigorous and transparent synthesis of empirical studies examining how gendered assumptions shape judicial perceptions of adult female victims of SV and IPV.

Eligibility criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (a) sampled judges, prosecutors, or mock juries (jury eligible community members used as experimental proxies for lay decision-makers in jury systems), or other justice professionals if results specific to judges or prosecutors could be extracted; (b) examined biases, beliefs, perceptions, misconceptions, or stereotypes influencing judicial decision-making; (c) focused on adult female victims (*i.e.*, 18 years or older) of SV or IPV; (d) empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals; (e) using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method studies; (f) written in Portuguese, English, French, or Spanish. No publication date restrictions were applied.

Mock juror studies were retained to capture experimental evidence on decision-making processes, although their findings are interpreted with caution given the differences between experimental settings and real-world judicial decision-making contexts.

Exclusion criteria included: (a) studies with minor victims, (b) studies with male or indeterminate victims, (c) student samples (to ensure findings reflect institutional decision-making rather than lay perceptions), and (d) literature reviews, theoretical studies, and gray literature (*i.e.*, doctoral theses, master dissertations, books, book chapters, conference papers).

Identification of studies

The search encompassed five electronic databases, exploring titles and abstracts: PubMed, Web of Science, Medline, PsycINFO, and SCOPUS. On December 24 2025, two independent researchers with an MSc in Applied Psychology ran a search utilizing the following equation: (judge* OR court* OR magistrate* OR judicial OR prosecutor* OR “mock jur*”) AND (bias* OR misconception* OR perception* OR myth* OR belie* OR attitude* OR stereotype*) AND (“gender-based violence victim*” OR “sexual violence victim*” OR “assault* victim*” OR “harassment victim*” OR “rape victim*” OR “offense victim*” OR “crime victim*” OR “domestic violence victim*” OR “intimate partner violence victim*” OR “battered”) AND NOT (child* OR minor*). A backward search of reference lists in relevant theoretical and review studies was also performed.

Study selection

The identified studies were imported into Rayyan software (Ouzzani et al., 2016), and duplicates were deleted. Then, the first and second authors independently screened titles and abstracts of all articles retrieved, and the papers were selected for full-text eligibility

assessment. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, with consultation of the third author (the last author) if necessary. Interrater agreement was strong, with a Cohen's Kappa coefficient of .807.

Data extraction

The selected manuscripts for inclusion underwent coding by the same two researchers. Again, any discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and if necessary, the last author was consulted. Data were extracted using a standardized Excel sheet, capturing publication year, country of origin, sample type (judges, prosecutors, both, or mock juries/jurors), sample size, study design, research features (interviews, sentences, trial observations), crime type, extra-legal factors (*e.g.*, gender stereotypes), and main outcomes (see Table 1).

Quality assessment

The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT – version 2018, Hong et al., 2018) was used to evaluate the study quality. Each study was scored 0–5, with criteria rated as “yes” = 1, “no” or “cannot tell” = 0.

Data analysis

Narrative synthesis was used to integrate findings across diverse study designs, jurisdictions, and decision-making contexts, following guidance from Popay et al. (2006). The synthesis involved a structured, interpretative approach to identifying recurring thematic categories across studies, considering variables such as victim characteristics, evidentiary factors, decision-maker characteristics, and crime type. Findings were grouped inductively to capture common mechanisms in credibility assessment, evidentiary evaluation, and attributions of responsibility. Relationships within and across studies were explored to understand how these factors operated in different legal contexts and study designs. The study quality was assessed using the MMAT, informed interpretation of findings, particularly in cases of inconsistent results.

Results

Screening and selection of studies

A total of 1015 studies were identified from the initial database search and manual reference checking. Studies identified through systematic searches were imported into the Rayyan software (Ouzzani et al., 2016). After removing duplicates, titles and abstracts of 696 studies were screened, yielding 87 full-text articles for eligibility assessment based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. A codebook was developed to extract data from the included papers, collecting information on references (*e.g.*, authors and year), study characteristics (*e.g.*, crime type, methodological design), sample characteristics (*e.g.*, size and type of participants), and outcomes. Following full-text screening, 28 studies met all eligibility criteria and

Table 1. Characteristics of the included studies.

Source Country	Crime type	Methodological design	Sample type and characteristics	Main outcomes
Ambel (2023) Chile	Rape	1. Qualitative description (Content analysis, 1 court ruling)	Judge ($n = 3$)	1) Gender stereotypes and rape myths, 2) credibility discounting, 3) assessment of the evidence without a gender perspective, 4) physical evidence, 5) sexual history.
Beichner and Spohn (2012)USA	Rape	4. Quantitative descriptive (666 case files)	Prosecutors	1) Risk-taking behaviors (inviting suspect to residence, alcohol consumption), 2) relationship with suspect (stranger, acquaintance, relative, intimate partner), 3) moral character (prior criminal record), 4) prompt report (within one hour), 5) victim injury, 6) physical evidence.
Borgida and White (1978)USA	Rape	2. Quantitative randomized controlled trial	Mock juries, prospective jurors, eligible for jury duty ($n = 358$)	1) Sexual history.
Brown et al. (2007)UK	Rape	5. Mixed methods (Quantitative analysis of 105 case files, content analysis of interviews)	Prosecutors ($n = 2$)	1) False allegations, 2) emotional expression, 3) behavior at the time of the offense, 4) alcohol consumption, 5) prior criminal record, 6) relationship with offender, 7) physical evidence.
Chalmers et al. (2021) Scotland	Rape	1. Qualitative description (Trial simulation method)	Mock juries, community jury- eligible members ($n = 431$)	1) Physical resistance, 2) emotional expression ("genuine victims cry out for help"), 3) corroboration and proof/physical evidence, 4) behavior before (alcohol consumption) and after (showering) the abuse, 5) report delay, 6) false allegations.
Ellison and Munro (2009)UK	Rape	1. Qualitative description (Trial simulation method)	Mock juries ($n =$ 27groups), community jury- eligible members	1) Victims' "flirtatious" or "risky" behavior (inviting a male acquaintance home), 2) complainant's flat location (hall, dining room, bedroom), 3) alcohol consumption, 4) presence of injuries, 5) false allegations.
Feldman- Summers and Palmer (1980)USA	Rape	3. Quantitative non- randomized (cross- sectional)	Superior court judges ($n = 17$), prosecuting attorneys ($n = 22$)	1) Risk-taking behaviors (going out alone at night, to dress and behave less seductively), 2) false allegations (if willing to engage in non-marital sex, unwilling to take a lie detector test, prior social contact with the assailant), 3) delayed reporting, 4) lack of physical injuries.
Gawrylowicz and Kirk (2025) Scotland	Rape	2. Quantitative randomized controlled trial	Mock juries, community and university campus jury-eligible members ($n = 198$)	1) Linguistic stereotypes (nonstandard dialect), 2) alcohol consumption, 3) credibility discounting, 4) perceptions of consent.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Source Country	Crime type	Methodological design	Sample type and characteristics	Main outcomes
Gyllys and McNamara (1996)USA	Rape	4. Quantitative descriptive (Survey)	Prosecutors and assistant prosecutors ($n = 182$)	Low rape myth acceptance among prosecutors; male prosecutors scored higher ($M = 22.8$, $SD = 8.4$) than females ($M = 20.0$, $SD = 4.8$). Scores ranged from 13 to 60 out of 87, mean = 22.3. Male were more likely to hold such beliefs (t (86.7) = -2.61 , $p = .01$).
Hall et al. (2015) Australia	IPV (homicide)	1. Qualitative (Grounded theory, 14 sentencing remarks)	Judges ($n = 9$)	1) Motherhood (being a loving mother), 2) being a good daughter, 3) career/doing well in her studies, 4) victim- blaming (leaving the relationship, harm minimization).
Hartman and Belknap (2003)USA	IPV	5. Mixed methods (Judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys' interviews, questionnaires)	Both* ($n = 62$, 14 judges, 31 public defenders, 18 prosecutors)	1) Victim behaviors and character (911 calls, police reports, excited utterances at the scene, signed complaints and/or affidavits), 2) motives of report (weekend divorce, drug or alcohol use), 3) criminal variables (extent of injuries, photos of injuries, offense severity, facts about the case).
Le Grand et al. (2021)USA	Rape	4. Quantitative descriptive (Survey)	Jury-eligible community members ($n = 186$)	1) Alcohol consumption Professionals' characteristics: Juries sex.
MacNeil et al., (2024) USA	IPV	3. Quantitative non- randomized (controlled trial)	Prosecutors ($n = 94$)	1) Blame for staying in the relationship. Professionals' characteristics: 2) holding traditional beliefs resulted in more attributing victim-blame.
Mcintosh and Davis (2022)UK	Rape	3. Quantitative non- randomized (cross- sectional)	Juror-eligible community members ($n = 907$)	1) Complainant gender, 2) employability, and 3) report delay.
Pals et al. (2023)USA	Rape	5. Mixed method (questionnaire, open- ended questions data)	Juror-eligible community members ($n = 240$)	1) Victim's emotional display (crying).
Quilter et al., (2022) Australia	Rape	1. Qualitative description (Transcript analysis of 33 trials)	Judges (n N/A)	1) Report delay, 2) police cooperation, 3) accuracy/report details.
Raver et al. (2025) Sweden	Rape	5. Mixed method (questionnaire, open- ended questions data)	Prosecutors ($n = 70$)	1) False allegations, 2) rape myth acceptance and professional role as a predictor of victim credibility, 3) victim blame linked to stereotypes of false reporting.
Rinde et al. (2024) Norway	Rape	3. Quantitative non- randomized (case-control study; 102 case trials)	Judges' decisions	Victims' behavior, operationalized by a subscale of the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale called "She Asked For It" (IRMAS-SAFI): 1) type of clothing, 2) going to a room alone with a guy, 3) victim's sexual history, 4) saying no unclearly, and 5) kissing.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

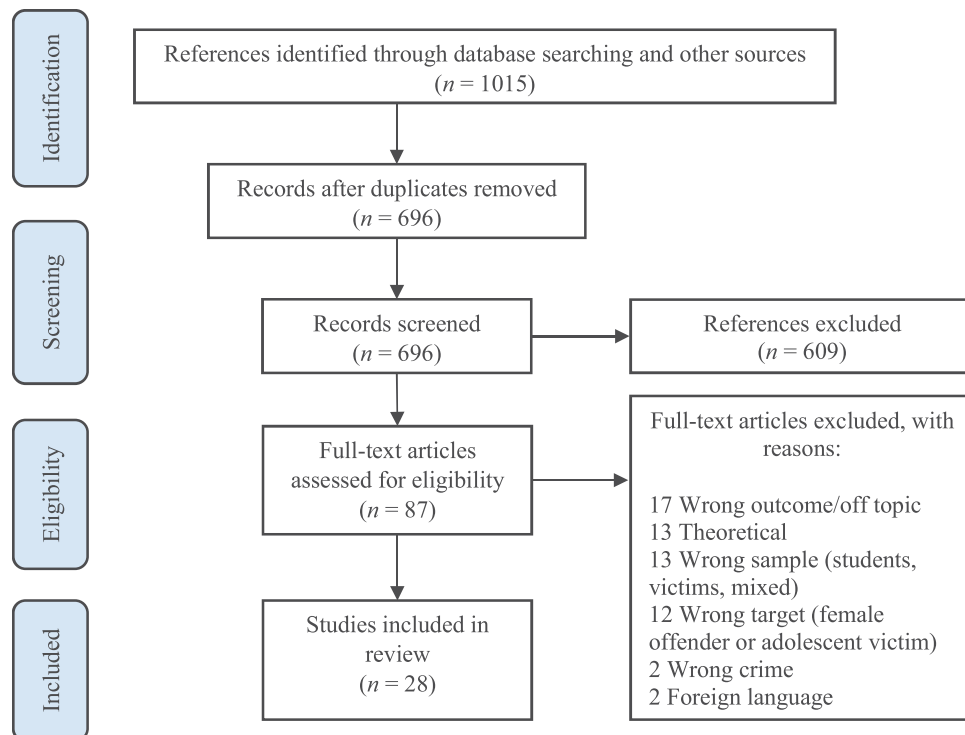
Source Country	Crime type	Methodological design	Sample type and characteristics	Main outcomes
Schaffer (2023) Australia	Rape	1. Qualitative (Thematic and systematic content analysis, 9 case trials)	Both*	1) Sexual history.
Sharma et al. (2025)India	Rape	1. Qualitative (thematic analysis of interviews)	Prosecutors (<i>n</i> = 15)	1) False allegations; 2) physical resistance; 3) physical injury evidence or murder.
Shepherd (2002) Alaska	Rape	1. Qualitative description (Ethnographic case study, 1 case trial)	Jurors, attorneys, prosecutors	1) Victim behavior and character (being drunk), 2) motive of report (false allegations belief), 3) misconceptions about consent and rape (lack of resistance), 4) evidence and injuries, 5) racial bias, 6) rape myths (victim desire), 7) stranger rape norms (rape only counts if committed by a stranger with a weapon).
Smith and Skinner (2017) UK	Rape	1. Qualitative description (28 court observations and critical discourse analysis of handwritten trials transcripts)	Both* (<i>n</i> N/A)	1) Victim's demeanor, 2) report delay, 3) keeping contact with the accused, 4) physical resistance.
Sommer et al. (2016)USA	Rape	4. Quantitative descriptive (Survey)	Mock jurors, community members (<i>n</i> = 332)	1) Offender and victims' sex, 2) relationship of the victim with the offender (stranger vs. acquaintance vs. intimate partner), 3) revictimization status, Professionals' characteristics: 4) jurors' sex, 5) the role of life history strategy, 6) role of rape myth acceptance.
Temkin et al. (2016)UK	Rape	1. Qualitative (Ethnography, 8 trial observations)	Both* (<i>n</i> N/A)	1) Lack of injury/torn clothes; 2) failure to resist; 3) report delay; 4) prior allegations of rape suggest fabrication; 5) sexual history; 6) rape is easy to allege; 7) rape by partner/husband is not really rape; 8) real victims of marital rape leave the marital home; 9) clothing may precipitate rape; 10) kissing as consent; 11) post-rape behaviour/demeanor in court.
Ventura (2016) Portugal	Rape	1. Qualitative (Document analysis, ethnographic methodology, 4 rape trials observation, and 20 interviews)	Both* (10 judges, 8 prosecutors, 2 attorneys)	1) Stereotyped gender roles, 2) "real victim" myth, 3) emotional expression; 4) physical resistance; 5) previous sexual behavior; 6) lifestyle.
Wasarhaley and Vilk (2019)USA	Rape	3. Quantitative non-randomized (cross-sectional)	Mock jurors, community members (<i>n</i> = 174)	1) Appearance-related factors (clothing style, visible tattoos), 2) lack of evidence, 3) reasonable doubt, 4) victim's behavior during the incident, 5) victim emotion/victim's demeanor, 6) witness testimony. Participant/juror characteristics: gender and age.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Source Country	Crime type	Methodological design	Sample type and characteristics	Main outcomes
Wessel et al. (2006) Norway	Rape	3. Quantitative non-randomized (cross-sectional)	Judges ($n = 53$)	1) Emotional expression (Congruent, neutral, incongruent).
Whittle and Hall (2018) Australia	IPV (homicide)	1. Qualitative (Grounded theory, 52 sentencing remarks)	Judges ($n = 52$)	1) Alcohol consumption and/or drugs use, 2) race of both the victim and offender.

*Both = prosecutors + judges.

**Figure 1.** PRISMA flowchart of the study selection process.

were included in the systematic review. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA flowchart of the study selection process, including reasons for exclusion.

Quality assessment

Nine studies fulfilled all MMAT criteria of excellence (Ambel, 2023; Chalmers et al., 2021; Ellison & Munro, 2009; Hall et al., 2015; Pals et al.; Rinde et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2025; Shepherd, 2002; Smith & Skinner, 2017). Seven studies met four out of five criteria (Brown et al., 2007; Hartman & Belknap, 2003; McIntosh & Davis, 2022; Quilter et al., 2022; Schaffer, 2023; Temkin et al., 2016; Whittle & Hall, 2018), seven met three criteria (Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Le Grand et al., 2021; Raver et al., 2025; Sommer et al., 2016;

Ventura, 2016; Wasarhaley & Vilk, 2019; Wessel et al., 2006), three met two criteria (Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980; Gawrylowicz & Kirk, 2025; MacNeil et al., 2024), and two met only one criterion (Borgida & White, 1978; Gyls & McNamara, 1996).

Variability in MMAT scores was primarily due to non-representative samples, incomplete reporting of sampling strategies, omission of psychometric properties of instruments, and lack of response rates. The study quality informed the interpretation of results, with higher-quality studies given more weight when identifying recurring patterns and drawing conclusions, whereas lower quality studies were interpreted with caution to avoid overgeneralization.

Characteristics of included studies

Study characteristics

The 28 included studies, published between 1978 and 2025, employed diverse research designs: qualitative ($n = 13$), quantitative descriptive ($n = 3$), mixed methods ($n = 4$), quantitative randomized controlled trial ($n = 2$), and quantitative non-randomized studies ($n = 6$). Participants included judges ($n = 6$ studies), prosecutors ($n = 6$), both professionals ($n = 7$), and mock juries or jurors ($n = 9$). The studies were conducted in Australia ($n = 4$), UK ($n = 5$), USA ($n = 10$), Chile ($n = 1$), Norway ($n = 2$), Scotland ($n = 2$), Portugal ($n = 1$), India ($n = 1$), Sweden ($n = 1$), and Alaska ($n = 1$). Table 1 summarizes these details.

Regarding sample characteristics, sample sizes ranged from two participants in judge/prosecutor studies (Brown et al., 2007) to 182 (Gyls & McNamara, 1996), with most studies including both male and female participants ($n = 9$). Two studies did not provide that information.

Mock jury studies included 26 (Shepherd, 2002) to 907 participants (Mcintosh & Davis, 2022), with one study reporting 27 groups without specifying participant numbers (Ellison & Munro, 2009). All of them used samples composed of both male and female individuals and targeted rape crimes.

Case-file studies analyzed between one (Ambel, 2023) and 666 cases (Beichner & Spohn, 2012).

Target of study

Twenty-one studies focused exclusively on female victims, while six included both male and female victims but reported female victim outcomes separately. Twenty-four studies addressed sexual offenses such as rape and sexual assault, and four focused on IPV, including two IPV-related homicide studies. This distribution suggests a strong imbalance in the evidence base, with findings predominantly reflecting SV contexts. Consequently, patterns identified in this review are primarily grounded in SV-related studies, while conclusions regarding IPV should be interpreted with caution due to the limited number of studies available.

Study outcomes

Consistent with the review's inclusion criteria, only adult female victims were analyzed. The legal reasoning, credibility assessments, and social expectations for adult women differ fundamentally from those concerning children (Callan et al., 2012; Goodman & Melinder,

2010; Sullivan et al., 2022). Adult women are disproportionately subject to moral and behavioral scrutiny in judicial contexts, making gender bias particularly salient (Cook & Cusack, 2010). The results are organized by crime type and integrates evidence from both judicial actors (judges and prosecutors) and experimental studies using mock jurors. Mock juror samples consisted of community members eligible for jury service within their jurisdictions, increasing the ecological relevance of these findings. However, as experimental participants, they do not operate under the institutional, procedural, and accountability constraints of real legal decision-making.

Sexual violence

Across the reviewed studies, differences emerged in the factors shaping credibility assessments for SV versus IPV cases. Evidence from judicial and experimental studies suggests that judicial and prosecutorial decision-making in SV cases is shaped by recurring gendered stereotypes, which may operate as functional mechanisms within legal evaluation processes. Rather than operating as isolated myths, these assumptions appear to shape how evidence is interpreted, how credibility is constructed, and how responsibility is assigned. These mechanisms can be interpreted as operating in interconnected ways, shaping how cases are evaluated and judged.

Findings are presented by the decisional functions these stereotypes perform, noting quality as a supplementary consideration where relevant. For outcomes beyond victim behavior, including evidentiary evaluation, normative judgments, disclosure timing, and decision-maker characteristics, these patterns were generally observed across studies, regardless of sample type or quality, suggesting the presence of recurring patterns of gender bias across study types.

Construction and discounting of victim credibility

A central pattern identified across studies was the role of victim credibility in shaping legal and evaluative outcomes. Across studies, victim credibility was frequently shaped by gendered expectations of behavior, emotional display, and moral conduct. Evidence from judicial actors and mock juror samples converged on this pattern, although the latter reflects controlled experimental conditions rather than institutional decision-making. Overall, victim behavior was analyzed in 11 studies.

Evidence from judges and prosecutors. Judges and prosecutors evaluated credibility through adherence to norms of resistance, coherence, and immediacy of reporting. High-quality studies (Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980; Rinde et al., 2024; Smith & Skinner, 2017) showed that ambiguous refusals, social behaviors (e.g., offering drinks, inviting the perpetrator home), intoxication, delayed reporting, or limited physical resistance were frequently interpreted as indicators of consent, particularly in acquaintance or non-stranger assaults.

Victim characteristics, including age, clothing, intoxication, and prior sexual history, were associated with reduced credibility and increased blame (Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980; Rinde et al., 2024; Smith & Skinner, 2017; Wasarhaley & Vilk, 2019). Social behaviors, such as inviting the perpetrator home or engaging in prior interaction, also shaped credibility, reduced juror sympathy, and negatively affected case

progression (Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Brown et al., 2007; Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980; Ventura, 2016). These patterns suggest that rape myths function as normative frameworks, defining “appropriate” victim conduct (e.g., rational decision-making, physical resistance, and avoidance of continued contact with the accused), and framing deviations as indicative of diminished credibility (Smith & Skinner, 2017).

Emotional expression was associated with credibility assessments and often functioned as a heuristic. Displays of fear, shame, or distress (e.g., crying, stammering) were associated with higher perceived credibility, greater sympathy, and increased likelihood of guilty verdicts, particularly when physical evidence was limited (Brown et al., 2007; Smith & Skinner, 2017; Ventura, 2016). Conversely, emotional restraint or flat affect reduced credibility, especially in acquaintance or non-stranger cases (Smith & Skinner, 2017). Ventura (2016) observed that emotional demeanor exerted a stronger influence in lower courts, where judges directly observed victims’ testimony, suggesting that proximity amplifies gendered expectations regarding how a “real” victim should behave. However, the findings were not entirely consistent, with some evidence indicating variability in how emotional displays affect credibility (Wessel et al., 2006).

Victims’ prior sexual history emerged as a particularly salient credibility-discounting mechanism in four studies. Across studies, such evidence was used to undermine women’s trustworthiness and reinforce consent-related myths, influencing credibility assessments and both sentence type and length (Ambel, 2023; Rinde et al., 2024; Schaffer, 2023; Smith & Skinner, 2017).

Evidence from mock jurors and jury-eligible samples. Experimental studies with mock jurors replicated similar patterns under controlled conditions, suggesting the presence of underlying cognitive and normative mechanisms, although these findings do not directly reflect institutional decision-making. Jurors relied on similar implicit socio-sexual scripts regarding how consent is communicated and how victims should behave before, during, and after sexual encounters (e.g., Ellison & Munro, 2009). These scripts structured stereotypical expectations of “normal” sexual interaction and shaped interpretations of victim behavior.

Consistent with this, behaviors such as alcohol consumption, inviting the perpetrator home, or engaging in prior social interaction were frequently interpreted as indicative of consent, reduced credibility, and lower sympathy (Chalmers et al., 2021; Ellison & Munro, 2009; Le Grand et al., 2021; Wasarhaley & Vilk, 2019). Although a lower quality study suggests variability in these effects, for example, Gawrylowicz and Kirk (2025) did not find alcohol consumption to significantly influence credibility, blame, or perceived consent, suggesting context or methodological sensitivity.

Prior sexual history and prior victimization similarly reduced perceived moral character and credibility, increased blame, and could be used to support an accused person’s belief in consent, while restrictions on its admissibility increased credibility and conviction rates (Borgida & White, 1978; Schaffer, 2023; Sommer et al., 2016).

Appearance-related cues, including tattoos or perceived attractiveness, subtly influenced credibility assessments, victim blame, and guilty verdicts, through gendered assumptions about sexual behavior and trustworthiness (Wasarhaley & Vilk, 2019).

Emotional expression also functioned as a credibility cue. Expectations that a “genuine” victim would display distress (e.g., crying or calling for help) shaped credibility assessments,

with deviations from expected emotional responses reducing perceived believability (Chalmers et al., 2021; Pals et al., 2023). Jurors who acquitted often discounted emotional displays in the absence of corroborating physical evidence, indicating tension between affective and evidentiary evaluation (Pals et al., 2023). Conversely, emotional restraint or flat affect reduced credibility, especially in acquaintance or non-stranger cases (Chalmers et al., 2021).

Finally, some studies highlighted the role of extra-legal cues. For example, victims speaking in a nonstandard dialect were perceived as less credible than one speaking Scottish Standard English, although dialect did not influence blame attributions or verdict outcomes; these findings should be interpreted with caution given lower methodological quality (Gawrylowicz & Kirk, 2025).

Evidentiary filtering and the hierarchization of proof

A second mechanism involved the filtering and hierarchical valuation of evidence, with a systematic privileging of physical over testimonial evidence. Physical and forensic evidence was examined in nine studies.

Evidence from judges and prosecutors. Judges and prosecutors relied on physical injuries, DNA, or other forensic indicators to enhance credibility and case progression, while absence of such evidence, or limited victim cooperation, could suggest consent (Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980; Rinde et al., 2024; Ventura, 2016). Consistent with this, cases involving corroborating evidence were more likely to progress through the legal system, particularly when corroborating physical evidence was present. In contrast, when such evidence was lacking, decision-making relied more heavily on assessments of victim behavior and credibility (Brown et al., 2007; Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980).

Rape myths further guided evidentiary interpretation, leading judges to discount supporting evidence while privileging forms perceived as more “objective,” such as DNA, and with male expert testimony often weighted more heavily, resulting in higher guilty verdicts (Ambel, 2023; Shepherd, 2002).

Prosecutorial decision-making further reflected these patterns. Two studies reported that prosecutors applied stereotypical “real rape” indicators, including the extreme force or injury, and endorsed inflated false-report beliefs (Raver et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2025).

Evidence from mock jurors and jury-eligible samples. Under experimental conditions, jurors similarly prioritized physical evidence over testimonial or contextual information. The absence of such evidence was sometimes interpreted as indicative of consent, particularly in non-stranger rape scenarios (Chalmers et al., 2021; Wasarhaley & Vilk, 2019), and reduced the likelihood of prosecution or conviction (Pals et al., 2023).

Jurors also expressed ambivalence toward expert testimony and frequently required corroborating physical evidence to support conviction decisions, even when legal instructions emphasized its non-necessity (Chalmers et al., 2021; Ellison & Munro, 2009). Additionally, emotional displays were devalued relative to physical proof in acquittal decisions (Pals et al., 2023).

Normative judgments of victim responsibility and moral worth

Gender stereotypes were associated with normative judgments of victim responsibility and moral worth, shaping perceptions of blameworthiness and legitimacy, and reflecting perceived entitlement to protection and legitimacy as a “genuine” victim.

Evidence from judges and prosecutors. Deviations from expected behaviors, such as continued contact with the perpetrator or perceived risk-taking, were interpreted as undermining credibility and increasing victim blame (Ambel, 2023; Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Smith & Skinner, 2017).

Judges and prosecutors considered relational context, with stranger cases generally seen as more credible and more likely to progress than those involving acquaintances or intimate partners, though this effect diminished with forensic evidence (Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Smith & Skinner, 2017; Ventura, 2016).

Evidence from mock jurors and jury-eligible samples. More broadly, responsibility evaluations were structured by shared normative expectations regarding sexual behavior. And consent jurors evaluated victims against shared expectations regarding how consent is communicated and how victims should behave before, during, and after sexual encounters, with behaviors such as inviting the perpetrator home, engaging in social interaction, or consuming alcohol interpreted as signaling willingness or reducing the perceived seriousness of the offense (Ellison & Munro, 2009).

Similarly, the lack of physical resistance or absence of injury was interpreted as inconsistent with “genuine” victim behavior, increasing attributions of responsibility to the complainant, even when alternative explanations (*e.g.*, trauma responses) were acknowledged (Chalmers et al., 2021).

Exposure to a victim’s prior sexual history, lack of resistance, or delayed reporting increased perceived responsibility, strengthened inferences of consent, and contributed to greater victim blame (Borgida & White, 1978). Beyond credibility, as noted above, appearance cues contributed to attributions of moral responsibility and blame, consistent with gendered assumptions regarding the “appropriate” conduct of victims (Borgida & White, 1978; Ellison & Munro, 2009; Wasarhaley & Vilk, 2019).

In contrast to findings from judges and prosecutors, mock juror studies did not consistently link relationship type (stranger, acquaintance, or partner) to blame or responsibility attributions (Sommer et al., 2016).

Together, these findings suggest that the responsibility attributions are not solely derived from case facts but may be shaped by gendered normative frameworks that define what constitutes a legitimate victim.

Temporal expectations and the policing of disclosure

Finally, evidence suggests that stereotypes shape judicial reasoning through normative expectations regarding disclosure timing (examined in four studies), functioning as a mechanism for discrediting claims. Unlike broader credibility assessments, this mechanism specifically targets when and how victims report.

Evidence from judges and prosecutors. Judges and prosecutors associated delayed reporting or informal disclosure to friends or colleagues with reduced credibility and

prosecution likelihood (Brown et al., 2007; Quilter et al., 2022). Deviation from expectations of immediate and precise reporting could lead to doubts about the authenticity of the victim's allegation (Quilter et al., 2022). Skepticism was particularly pronounced when delays coincided with lack of visible injuries or physical evidence (Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980; Rinde et al., 2024; Ventura, 2016). Judges have also expressed greater skepticism toward delayed reports compared to other professional groups (e.g., service professionals), particularly regarding perpetrator identification (Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980). Similar trends were observed in both high and low quality studies.

Rape myths reinforced expectations of prompt reporting, framing delays as abnormal or indicative of ulterior motives, such as regret, revenge, or emotional instability (Smith & Skinner, 2017; Ventura, 2016).

Evidence from mock jurors and jury-eligible samples. Mock jurors showed similar patterns, penalizing delayed reporting or informal disclosure to friends or colleagues in verdicts, with reduced credibility and lower conviction rates (Mcintosh & Davis, 2022), particularly when combined with the absence of physical evidence (Chalmers et al., 2021). These findings suggest that expectations regarding disclosure timing operate as an independent evaluative filter, distinct from broader credibility or moral judgments.

Decision-maker characteristics as moderators of stereotype use

Although the focus of this review is on victim-related stereotypes, several studies demonstrated that juror and judge characteristics moderated the extent to which such stereotypes influenced decisions. Eight studies examined decision-maker characteristics.

Evidence from judges and prosecutors. Female professionals were more likely to believe victims and reject rape myths, with male prosecutors showing higher acceptance compared to their female counterparts (Gyls & McNamara, 1996; Wasarhaley & Vilks, 2019). Gender-balanced and culturally diverse juries were associated with fairer verdicts and higher conviction rates, and also shaped credibility assessments (Shepherd, 2002).

Evidence from mock jurors and jury-eligible samples. Similarly, female jurors were more likely to believe victims and reject rape myths (Borgida & White, 1978; Le Grand et al., 2021; Pals et al., 2023). Male jurors with higher rape-myth acceptance attributed greater blame to victims (Sommer et al., 2016). Additional factors, including juror age, conservatism, and homophobic attitudes, also shaped credibility assessments (Borgida & White, 1978; McIntosh & Davis, 2022). Female jurors were more certain of the defendant's guilt than male jurors and male jurors were more likely to infer victim consent than female jurors (Borgida & White, 1978).

Also, female participants were more likely than male participants to rate the victim as credible and to express anger toward the defendant (Pals et al., 2023). Similarly, gender was the most notable predictor, with female participants showing higher victim credibility, lower victim blame, and greater sympathy, and being over four times more likely to convict the defendant (Wasarhaley & Vilks, 2019).

Intimate partner violence

Studies on IPV employed grounded theory analysis of judicial sentences, qualitative interviews with judges and prosecutors, and quantitative analyses of prosecutorial decision-making and sentencing patterns (Table 1).

Victim-blaming emerged in three moderate- to high-quality studies, in cases where women remained with abusive partners, who were often perceived as complicit or unreliable, whereas those who left were viewed as vindictive, accused of fabricating allegations, or emotionally unstable (Hartman & Belknap, 2003; MacNeil et al., 2024; Quilter et al., 2022). In MacNeil et al. (2024), this perception was stronger among professionals endorsing traditional masculinity ideology, with gender-role attitudes predicting greater skepticism toward victims.

Perpetrator leniency was observed in two high-quality studies, where offenders' behavior was attributed to external factors such as upbringing, relationship conflicts, or emotional distress (e.g., jealousy, betrayal, infidelity), rather than as expressions of violence, thereby reducing perceived culpability (Hall et al., 2015; Whittle & Hall, 2018).

Discussion

This systematic review examined how gender biases affect the treatment of women victims in legal contexts, with a primary empirical focus on SV and more limited evidence on IPV. Across 28 studies, recurring patterns suggest that legal professionals often assess victims through entrenched gender stereotypes, including victim-blaming attitudes and myths about expected behaviors (see Table 2). These patterns suggest that judicial decision-making may be shaped not only by individual bias but also by structural and institutional patterns, particularly evidenced in SV-related decision-making contexts, that may reproduce gendered hierarchies within the justice system. It should be noted that the majority of included studies focused on SV, with fewer addressing IPV. Consequently, conclusions regarding IPV are based on more limited evidence and should be interpreted cautiously. Moreover, included studies varied widely in methodology, sample size, geographical and cultural context, and outcome measures. This heterogeneity limits the generalizability of observed patterns and underscores the need for careful interpretation. Collectively, the findings suggest that gender bias may operate less as a series of isolated prejudices and more as a set of normalized heuristics shaping evaluations of credibility and responsibility in legal decision-making, though contextual factors and study-specific limitations must be considered.

Findings suggest that victims' personal characteristics, behaviors, and relational context frequently influenced credibility evaluations, guilt attribution, and sentencing outcomes (Ambel, 2023; Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Chalmers et al., 2021; Gawrylowicz & Kirk, 2025; Le Grand et al., 2021; Rinde et al., 2024; Smith & Skinner, 2017). Across studies, credibility assessments differed by crime type. In SV cases, judgments largely focused on event-specific factors, such as physical resistance, injuries, or corroborating forensic evidence. Victims' behavior immediately following the assault, including delayed reporting or social interactions with the perpetrator, was closely scrutinized. In contrast, in IPV cases, credibility was evaluated in the context of relational dynamics, including permanence in the abusive relationship, ambivalence, and dependency. Women who remained with abusive partners

Table 2. Summary of findings of the systematic review.

Domain	Specific biases and stereotypes	Implications
Victim-related factors	Personal character: Victims aligning with societal ideals (e.g., modest, respectable) were more likely to be believed; deviations prompted skepticism.	Reinforces discriminatory credibility assessments based on moral judgments rather than evidence.
	Substance use: Victims consuming alcohol or drugs were often blamed and perceived as less credible.	Perpetuates victim-blaming and deters reporting among those with substance use histories.
	Sexual history: Scrutiny of past sexual behavior was used to question credibility and character.	Contravenes legal protections and reinforces rape myths.
	Precipitation: IPV victims were sometimes blamed for provoking the abuse.	Minimizes perpetrator responsibility and discourages help-seeking.
	Behavioral expectations: Victims' responses deviating from perceived "logical" reactions led to disbelief.	Ignores trauma responses and neurobiological evidence on victim behavior.
	Timing of report: Prompt reporting was seen as more credible, delays raised suspicion.	Contributes to attrition in cases with delayed disclosure, common in known-perpetrator assaults.
	Cooperation with investigation: Limited engagement was interpreted as reduced credibility.	Overlooks trauma or safety concerns.
	Physical resistance: Lack of resistance was sometimes interpreted as consent or fabrication.	Disregards realities of coercion and fear responses.
	Emotional response: Emotional display (or lack thereof) affects credibility judgments.	Reflects subjective bias, not evidentiary reliability.
	Relationship/contact with accused: Maintaining contact with abuser was seen as complicity or evidence of falsehood.	Ignores complex socio-economic and psychological constraints.
Allegation-related factors	Physical evidence: Presence of severe injury or biological evidence boosted credibility; absence led to reliance on stereotypes.	Overemphasis on forensic proof marginalizes cases without visible injuries.
	Assumed ulterior motives: Suspicions of revenge or fabrication fostered skepticism and under-prosecution.	Leads to under-prosecution and underreporting.
	Perpetrator's criminal history: Past offenses increase perceived credibility of victim.	Potentially biases decision-making and undermines case-by-case evaluation.
Professional-related factors	Traditional beliefs: Judges and prosecutors with conservative gender attitudes were more influenced by stereotypes.	Highlights need for bias-awareness interventions.
	Professional's sex: Male legal actors were more likely to favor male defendants and disbelieve female victims; female actors showed greater empathy and myth rejection.	Suggests benefits of gender diversity in judicial bodies.

were often perceived as complicit, whereas those leaving could be judged emotionally unstable or vindictive. These patterns illustrate that while SV credibility assessments are largely event-driven, IPV assessments appear to be relationally mediated, reflecting ongoing dynamics between victim and perpetrator rather than a single incident. These findings intersect with entrenched stereotypes, including rape myths and the expectations of the "ideal victim," which influenced judicial and prosecutorial decisions.

Literature shows that rape myths remain influential among legal professionals and jurors, despite low reporting rates of sexual assaults, with fewer than 20% of assaults being formally reported, likely due to anticipated victim-blaming (Campbell et al., 2001; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Evidentiary reasoning is therefore rarely neutral, as it is filtered through gendered assumptions about what constitutes "real" rape. Evidentiary hierarchies are often shaped by rape myths rather than by statutory standards, systematically devaluing cases that do not conform to idealized narratives. These expectations simultaneously function as credibility heuristics, pre-structuring which victims are deemed believable before substantive evaluation of the facts, particularly in prosecutorial reasoning. Sharma et al. (2025), for example, found that many public prosecutors

endorsed the belief that a substantial proportion of rape allegations are false and relied on stereotypical indicators of “real rape,” such as visible injury, extreme force, or physical resistance, despite legal definitions explicitly rejecting such requirements. Complementing this, Raver et al. (2025) showed that higher rape myth acceptance among legal professionals was associated with stronger assumptions of false reporting, suggesting that prosecutorial skepticism is embedded in broader attitudinal frameworks rather than case-specific evidence.

Building on this, these myths affect credibility when victims’ behaviors deviate from the “perfect victim” stereotype, often involving scrutiny of sexual history, relationship with the offender, and expectations around emotional or physical evidence (Ambel, 2023; Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Campbell et al., 2015; Chalmers et al., 2021; Le Grand et al., 2021; McIntosh & Davis, 2022; Rinde et al., 2024; Schaffer, 2023; Smith & Skinner, 2017; Temkin et al., 2016).

In SV cases, certain victim behaviors, such as delayed reporting, alcohol consumption, or post-assault social interactions, were frequently misinterpreted as evidence of consent, particularly when the perpetrator was known to the victim (Chalmers et al., 2021; Ellison & Munro, 2009; Rinde et al., 2024). The scrutiny intensified when victims deviated from the “perfect victim” stereotype regarding sexual history, prior relationships, or emotional/physical evidence, interacting with jurors’ and judges’ gendered expectations (Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Le Grand et al., 2021; Smith & Skinner, 2017; Temkin et al., 2016). Limiting the admissibility of such evidence has shown to improve both conviction rates and victim credibility, highlighting the importance of protective legal reforms (Borgida & White, 1978).

Emotional expression, such as crying or showing fear, can enhance perceived credibility (Ask & Landström, 2010; Nitschke et al., 2019), though its absence may trigger skepticism. In some studies, consistency and detail in testimony appear to often outweigh emotional cues, particularly in higher courts where judges are less directly exposed to victims (Pals et al., 2023; Ventura, 2016; Wessel et al., 2006). This variability underscores the need for further qualitative research into how emotions are interpreted across judicial levels.

Physical evidence consistently strengthened victim credibility and countered stereotypes, whereas its absence heightened reliance on gendered assumptions and subjective credibility assessments, contributing to declining conviction rates and case attrition (Alderden et al., 2021; Ambel, 2023; Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Brown et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2015; Chalmers et al., 2021; Fansher & Welsh, 2023; Hohl & Stanko, 2015; Rinde et al., 2024; Tidmarsh & Hamilton, 2020; Ventura, 2016). This overreliance on forensic proof neglects the realities of trauma, including delayed disclosure and absence of physical injury, and is reinforced by persistent beliefs about “real victims,” such as expectations of immediate reporting or physical resistance, further perpetuating victim-blaming (Chalmers et al., 2021; Ellison & Munro, 2009; McIntosh & Davis, 2022; Quilter et al., 2022).

Delays in reporting and informal disclosures negatively impacted credibility and prosecutorial decisions (Brown et al., 2007; McIntosh & Davis, 2022). Victim cooperation also influenced charging decisions, highlighting the role of perceived willingness in legal outcomes (Brown et al., 2007). Skepticism was particularly pronounced when reports were delayed or visible injuries were absent, with false allegation narratives sometimes invoked to explain such delays (Feldman-Summers & Palmer, 1980; Ventura, 2016). Myths framing “real rape” as a stranger-perpetrated, violent attack persist (Beichner & Spohn, 2012; Chalmers et al., 2021; Shepherd, 2002; Smith &

Skinner, 2017) despite the majority of victims knowing their assailants (around 90%; Hester & Lilley, 2016). Such entrenched misconceptions reinforce distrust and barriers to justice.

Patterns affecting credibility appear consistent across several domains. For outcomes beyond victim behavior, such as evidentiary evaluation, normative judgments of responsibility, disclosure timing, and decision-maker characteristics, results were generally consistent across studies, regardless of methodological quality, indicating that some mechanisms of gender bias may reflect structurally embedded features of judicial reasoning. However, effects linked to victim behavior (*e.g.*, alcohol use, delayed reporting, or social interactions) were most consistently observed in higher-quality studies, suggesting that certain biases may be more sensitive to study design and/or context.

IPV-focused studies revealed similar biases, albeit in a more limited evidence base. Victim-blaming emerged consistently, with women who remained in abusive relationships often perceived as complicit or unreliable, while those attempting to leave could be judged emotionally unstable or fabricating allegations (Hartman & Belknap, 2003; MacNeil et al., 2024; Smith & Skinner, 2017). Conversely, male perpetrators were sometimes excused due to emotional distress or relational conflict (Hall et al., 2015; MacNeil et al., 2024; Whittle & Hall, 2018), minimizing perpetrator accountability and the severity of abuse, while ignoring socio-economic and psychological constraints shaping victims' decisions (Hall et al., 2015; Heron et al., 2022). These findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the small number of studies and variability in design and context.

Gender has also emerged as a significant moderator of judicial decision-making. Female judges and jurors demonstrated greater empathy toward victims, rejected rape myths more frequently, and delivered higher conviction rates than their male counterparts (Borgida & White, 1978; Le Grand et al., 2021; Shepherd, 2002; Wasarhaley & Vilks, 2019). Gender-balanced and culturally diverse juries were associated with fairer outcomes, suggesting that diversifying judicial and jury composition may mitigate bias (Shepherd, 2002).

Overall, findings suggest that gender stereotypes and myths can influence credibility assessments, evidentiary evaluation, and sentencing decisions. However, due to heterogeneity in study design, sample, and context, these conclusions should be considered tentative. Training programs alone have shown limited impact when implemented in isolation, as cultural and institutional norms continue to legitimize victim-blaming and minimize perpetrator accountability (Duban & Radačić, 2017; Htun & Jensenius, 2020; Jerónimo, 2019). Effective reform likely requires comprehensive strategies: gender-sensitive professional training, procedural and evidentiary changes to limit reliance on stereotypes, and public engagement initiatives to challenge societal myths. Such transformation must be implemented alongside broader cultural change, recognizing that judicial actors are embedded within social contexts shaping their perceptions and decisions (Flood, 2021). Evidence supporting these strategies is more prevalent in SV contexts, while more research is needed to confirm the effectiveness of IPV.

This review highlights the pervasive role of gendered assumptions in legal decision-making and the need for carefully targeted structural and cultural reforms, supported by rigorous evaluation and complemented by public awareness initiatives. Future research should assess and develop interventions in diverse cultural and institutional contexts to address the structural and attitudinal barriers perpetuating gender bias in legal practice.

Limitations and directions for future research

This review provides valuable insights into gender biases affecting the treatment of female victims in legal contexts, yet several limitations must be acknowledged. The methodological quality of the included studies varied considerably, reflecting inherent challenges in researching sensitive topics such as SV and IPV. Issues such as non-representative samples, incomplete psychometric data, low response rates, and vague analytical methods highlight the need for more rigorous and standardized research designs to reliably inform judicial practice and policy. The diversity of methodological approaches allows for a multidimensional analysis of this phenomenon, enriching the analysis of how justice professionals perceive and respond to female victims. However, it also introduces variability due to design, sample size, and measurement differences (Seawright, 2016). Most studies were conducted in Western contexts (UK, USA, Australia), limiting generalizability and underscoring the importance of considering cultural and systemic factors that shape attitudes and decisions. The wide time span of the studies further complicates comparisons, however both older and newer research confirmed the persistence of gender stereotypes in victim credibility and guilt attribution, suggesting these issues remain deeply entrenched despite societal changes.

The underrepresentation of IPV in the reviewed literature may reflect broader conceptual, structural, and methodological challenges associated with studying this form of violence in legal decision-making contexts. Research on SV has benefited from the extensive development and operationalization of constructs, such as rape myths, which are widely used to examine gender bias in both experimental and judicial contexts. In contrast, there is no equally established or consistently operationalized framework for examining bias in IPV cases, where attitudes are more often embedded in broader beliefs about relationships, responsibility, and victim behavior rather than captured through standardized “myth” constructs. Furthermore, unlike SV, which is often operationalized as a discrete event, IPV typically involves ongoing relational dynamics, patterns of coercion, and cumulative harm, making it more difficult to isolate within experimental and judicial study designs. This imbalance may contribute to the greater volume and comparability of SV-focused studies, while limiting the systematic investigation of IPV-related biases. It also points to a potential gap in the literature, suggesting the need for further conceptual development and empirical tools specifically designed to capture how gendered assumptions operate in IPV contexts.

Variations in sample types (real professionals *versus* mock jurors) may influence the findings, although mock jurors without legal expertise were largely excluded to enhance realism and applicability (Ellison & Munro, 2009). The legal definition of adulthood varies across jurisdictions, necessitating the exclusion of studies conflating minor and adult victims, a distinction crucial for contextual accuracy.

Despite these limitations, this review contributes to feminist theory by demonstrating how institutionalized gender stereotypes shape judicial outcomes. Findings highlight the importance of gender-sensitive training and trauma-informed, survivor-centered approaches to reduce victim-blaming and dispel rape myths (OECD, 2021; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024), as judges and prosecutors play a critical role in promoting fairness, countering stigma, and encouraging survivors to pursue justice with confidence (Murray et al., 2018; Overstreet & Quinn, 2013).

Conclusion

This systematic review examined how judges, prosecutors, and jurors perceive female victims through the lens of gender stereotypes, highlighting their influence on credibility assessments, legal decisions, and sentencing outcomes in cases of SV and IPV. Across the 28 studies reviewed, even experienced professionals were shown to be influenced by societal stereotypes and personal beliefs, often penalizing victims who deviate from entrenched norms (Castro-Rodrigues, 2017; Cook & Cusack, 2010; Drobak & North, 2008; Epstein & Goodman, 2019; Jones, 2019; Miller, 2018).

The synthesis delineates specific bias pathways, from initial credibility assessments to sentencing decisions, that may systematically disadvantage women who do not conform to the “perfect victim” stereotype. Recurrent patterns include the misinterpretation of delayed reporting, victim behavior, emotional expression, and absence of physical evidence, as well as the undue influence of sexual history and relational context. These biases persist across both SV and IPV cases, reinforcing myths that shift responsibility from perpetrators to victims (Burt, 1980; Klement et al., 2018; Leverick, 2020; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995).

Gender also emerged in decision-making, further suggesting that the composition of judicial actors may influence case outcomes, with more diverse juries and benches potentially contributing to fairer evaluations. Overall, the findings suggest that gender stereotypes and myths may shape credibility assessments, evidentiary evaluation, and sentencing decisions.

By integrating evidence from psychology, criminology, and gender studies, this review underscores the interdisciplinary and systemic nature of this issue. Despite national and procedural variations, the persistence of stereotypes across jurisdictions reveals a structural challenge observed across multiple jurisdictions, although primarily within SV-focused research contexts, and compromises the fundamental human right of access to justice. Addressing these entrenched patterns requires more than isolated reforms.

Future research should deepen the understanding of the mechanisms through which gender stereotypes are reproduced in legal decision-making and rigorously evaluate interventions aimed at dismantling them, particularly across diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Taken together, these findings call for a critical re-examination of how legal systems uphold or undermine, human rights and call attention to the need for systemic reform to ensure that justice processes protect, rather than restrict, the rights of those most affected by gender-based violence.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Marta Sousa:** Data curation, Methodology; **Andreia de Castro Rodrigues:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia [2020.06634.BD; 2023.00454.BD].

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