

**FANNI ANTALÓCZY**

**Abused Men: Representing Male Victims of Intimate Partner Violence  
and/or Sexual Abuse in *Law and Order: SVU***

Pro&Contra 6

No. 2 (2022) 25–44



## Abstract

The paper focuses on visual representations of intimate partner violence (IPV) and female perpetrated sexual assault (FPSA) in a cis-hetero context. Although research suggests that male the number of male victims is closer to female victims than believed by the general public, representation of such scenarios is still scarce. The paper analyses six episodes of the American police procedural, *Law and Order: SVU* depicting female perpetrated intimate partner violence and/or sexual assault; and concentrates on the representational attitudes of the series regarding the crime itself, the depiction of victims, the portrayal of perpetrators and the main characters' reactions during the investigations; and argues that the series depicts the existing myths, stereotypes and attitudes surrounding these male victims, but often questions them as well, and provides education for the audience about female perpetrated IPV and sexual abuse.

**Key words:** sexual assault, intimate partner violence, male victims, police procedural

## Introduction – Special Victims Unit

*Law and Order: SVU* or Special Victims Unit is the first spin-off of the American police procedural, *Law and Order* created by Dick Wolf, which, since its first release in 1990 has become a franchise with six different shows, including *SVU*.<sup>1</sup> *Special Victims Unit* was launched in 1999 and currently is at its 25<sup>th</sup> season, with more than 500 episodes all together. What sets *SVU* apart from the other police procedurals of the franchise is that – as the title suggests – this group of detectives specialise on a specific type of crime, namely offenses related to sexuality. Every *SVU* episode opens with the following quote, emphasizing the importance of this unit: “In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories.”<sup>2</sup> As indicated by these opening lines, *SVU* centres around sexually based offenses – different forms sexual abuse, assault, rape, however, they also deal with other special types of offenses and victims, for instance child abuse, domestic violence, cases involving non-heterosexual victims or sex workers, even when there is no apparent sexual component of the crime.

---

<sup>1</sup> The spin off shows are the following: *Law and Order: SVU*, *Organized Crime*, *Criminal Intent*, *London*, *LA* and *Trial by Jury*.

<sup>2</sup> Dick Wolf, *Law and Order: SVU* (1999-; NBC).

Arguably SVU has achieved a lot in normalising public discourse and educating about sexually based offenses, as the episodes provide realistic scenarios, showcase different perspectives and attitudes about sex-related crimes through the main characters, voice contrasting opinions, impart a set of vocabulary to describe these offenses, traumas and experiences and also offer points of identification, empathy and sympathy. The majority of the episodes focus on cases of more widespread, typical (or even stereotypical) setups of male perpetrators and female victims. However, this analysis focuses on the small minority of the episodes that depict incidents of intimate partner violence (IPV) and/or sexual abuse in a cis-hetero, but female on male context; in other words, situations in which IPV or different forms of sexual assault occur with an adult male victim and an adult female perpetrator.

Among the more than five hundred episodes there are only six that openly deal with adult male victims of IPV and/or sexual abuse. There are further episodes with male victims and female perpetrators, for instance statutory rape committed by an adult woman, financial abuse (for example when female sex-workers trick their client out of their money by feeding them drugs), or women killing or castrating the man who raped them; however, these are excluded from this analysis for the sake of coherence. Out of the six episodes three deal with intimate partner violence (“Asunder”, “December Solstice” and “What Can Happen in the Dark”) and there are also three episodes which feature sexual assault committed by a woman who is not an intimate partner of the male victim (“Ridicule”, “Design” and “Parole Violations”). The following analyses focus on how the series approaches the representation of the crime itself, how it depicts the victims, portrays the perpetrators, and how the main characters react during these investigations.

### ***Male victims***

Before the in-depth analyses of the episodes, the theoretical, sociological and psychological backgrounds of IPV, sexual abuse and especially male victim experiences need to be established. According to the World Health Organisation, IPV, or intimate partner violence “refers to any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship.”<sup>3</sup> Scott-Storey et al suggest that this definition

---

<sup>3</sup> Ronja Lindström. “Intimate Partner Violence against Men. A Systematic Review of How Definition, Study Characteristics and Quality Affects Prevalence. Master’s Thesis, Project in Criminology, Malmö University, Faculty of Health and Society, Institution of Criminology, Malmö, Sweden (2018): 3. pp. 1–25.

should be further extended and completed with considering any behaviors that have the *potential* to cause harm<sup>4</sup> (858) as well.

When it comes to sex offenses – given that *Special Victims Unit* takes place in New York and the detectives are bound by the regulations of the state – definitions of the New York Penal Law regarding IPV and sexually based offenses should be introduced as well. Excluding the sections on underage victims, NY Penal Law Article 130 differentiates four different types of sexual offenses: rape, criminal sexual act, sexual abuse and aggravated sexual abuse. Rape is defined as sexual intercourse without consent; criminal sexual act is described as oral or anal sexual conduct without consent; sexual abuse is sexual contact without consent; and aggravated sexual abuse means insertion of a foreign object or finger in the vagina, urethra, penis, rectum or anus of another.<sup>5</sup>

Intimate partner violence is often associated with physical and sexual abuse; however, it should be stated that various forms of intimate partner abuse do not include any physical or sexual component. Tillbrook, Allan and Dear delineate five more types of abuse apart from physical and sexual violence in intimate partner relations. These are the following: psychological abuse including emotional and cognitive abuse, which aim to undermine the victim's sense of logic and their self-worth respectively; verbal abuse that is defined as "behaviour that involves that use of language which is designed to humiliate, degrade, demean, intimidate, or subjugate"; financial or economical abuse occurs when the victim is deprived of basic necessities and their income or assets are seized; social abuse is "the imposition of isolation through the control of social activity, deprivation of liberty, or the deliberate creation of unreasonable dependence"; and spiritual abused is defined as the impairment of the victim's spiritual life, identity or well-being.<sup>6</sup>

Even though WHO's definition of IPV and NY Penal Law seem to be gender neutral in their terminology, there are still deep-rooted gender biases when it comes to IPV and sexual offenses. Such prejudice has long historical roots, given that in the seventeenth century for instance, men who suffered physical abuse at the hands of their wives, were often punished for forsaking masculinity.<sup>7</sup> As Ronja Lindstrøm also emphasizes, IPV has

---

<sup>4</sup> Kelly Scott-Storey, Sue O'Donnel, Marilyn Ford-Gilboe, Colleen Varcoe, Nadine Wathen, Jeannie Malcolm and Charlene Vincent. "What About the Men? A Critical Review of Men's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 24, no. 2. (2023): 858.

<sup>5</sup> New York Penal Law. 130. Sex offenses (§§ 130.00-130.96). <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/PEN>

<sup>6</sup> Emily Tillbrook, Alfred Allan, and Greg Dear. *Intimate Partner Abuse of Men* (Perth: Men's Advisory Network, 2010), 4–5.

<sup>7</sup> Amandine Dziewa and Fabienne Glowacz. "Getting out from Intimate Partner Violence: Dynamics and Processes. A Qualitative Analysis of Female and Male Victims' Narratives." *Journal of Family Violence* 37, no. 4 (2022): 644

for long been considered a female issue – even the WHO definition is given within the context of violence against women: “[h]istorically speaking, intimate partner violence has been considered a female victim issue (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005) and the concept of female victims is much more recognized in the general population than the concept of male victims.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it is still difficult to fathom a male victim of intimate partner violence, both in public discourse and often for academia as well: “up to 1980 the pronoun ‘she’ was used almost exclusively in research on sexual abuse survivors”<sup>9</sup>, even if increasing results show that the number of male victims is closer to that of female victims than ever thought: “several studies on IPV found equivalent rates of assault perpetrated by men and women.”<sup>10</sup>

Regarding sexual offenses, there are some prevalent myths as well which make it more difficult to conceptualize a heterosexual male victim of sexual assault perpetrated by a female. According to Coxell and King these are the following:

- The presence of erection or ejaculation implies consent on behalf of the survivor.
- A male cannot be forced to have sex against his will.
- Males are less affected by sexual assaults than females.<sup>11</sup>

Although these myths have been proven false – for instance erection and ejaculation are described as automatic and involuntary bodily functions, and male victims of sexual assaults do experience serious physiological and psychological harm – in public discourse and imagination unfortunately they are still widespread.

Most researchers agree that the majority of victims in sexually based crimes are women – although there is no such consensus when it comes to IPV –, however, that does not mean that the number of male victims is zero. As Carlyle et al point out, “[a]ccording to the results of the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), approximately 28.5% of men and 35.6% of women have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime; 13.8% of men and 24.3% of women have experienced severe physical IPV (Black et al., 2011).”<sup>12</sup> Tsui uses numbers to express the same figures, which might make the male victims’ experience more relatable “1.5 million women and 834.700 men annually are physically violated or raped

<sup>8</sup>Lindström. “Intimate Partner Violence against Men,” 3.

<sup>9</sup>Adrian W. Coxell, and Michael B. King. “Male victims of rape and sexual abuse.” *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, 11, no. 3 (1996): 298.

<sup>10</sup>Rute Carmo, Ana Grams and Teresa Magalhaes. “Men as Victims of Intimate Partner Violence.” *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* 18, no. 8 (2011): 356.

<sup>11</sup>Coxell and King. “Male victims of rape and sexual abuse,” 298–9.

<sup>12</sup>Kellie Carlyle, Jennifer A. Scarduzio, and Michael D. Slater. “Media Portrayals of Female Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29, no. 13, (2014): 2395.

by their intimate partners in the United States.”<sup>13</sup> Although there is a significant difference between the numbers of male and female victims, the number of male victims is far from zero, and these victimized men deserve to be heard, seen and represented.

### **Intimate partner violence in SVU**

The first episode of *Special Victims Unit* to deal with the notion of a female perpetrator in IPV appeared very early in the series (already in Season 2), however, for fourteen seasons the series seemed to abandon the issue, and female perpetrated IPV returned to be discussed in more explicit representations in Season 16 and 22. Although some ambiguity – especially in the verdicts – remain in the later episodes too, they more and more openly depict clear-cut female perpetrators and male victims; furthermore the two later episodes female perpetrated sexual abuse is portrayed as an integral part of intimate partner violence.

### ***Asunder***

Season 2 episode 7, titled “Asunder” is the very first episode in SVU where a possible male victim of intimate partner violence appears. The episode portrays an ambiguous IPV situation with implied bilateral abuse. It is the woman who attacks first – she throws a heavy pan towards her husband, hitting his head – however, in response the husband grabs her and drags her into the house. In the very next scene we can see Detective Munch taking the woman’s statement, accusing her husband of rape, implying that she uses the rape allegation as a distraction from her being the abuser.

When it comes to representational strategies around the IPV, the episode employs indirect representation: apart from the early scene of the altercation it rather implies than shows anything. For instance, the opening frames of the story display a TV screen with the show titled “Wild Weddings” and when it is turned off, we can hear the main couple fighting in the background. Furthermore, the alleged rape takes place off screen, and other instances of abuse are not visible either, only their aftermath. It is also mentioned several times that the husband (who is a police officer) made their previous domestic violence/dispute cases go away to protect his wife, because she is the abuser. However, these instances remain off-screen, and in terms of visual representation the episode does

---

<sup>13</sup> Venus Tsui. “Male Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse: Use and Helpfulness of Services.” *Social Work*, 59, no. 2 (2014): 121.

not take a clear stance at depicting a female abuser and a male victim. The episode never openly takes a stand in the question of who is the abuser and who is the victim. Neither of them is found guilty at the end, however, the husband's defence lawyer states: "she is the batterer Mr. Andrews, why are you protecting her?"<sup>14</sup>

In representing the two characters – the husband and wife – the episode also implies, but does not state that she is the abuser and he is the victim. The woman is depicted as a hostile, frustrated, aggressive person (often described as crazy); she even blows smoke in Detective Munch's face when he warns her that smoking is not allowed in government buildings. So the representation of the woman implies that she is the abuser, however, the husband's depiction does not clearly re-enforce his possible victimhood. He is often portrayed in a really masculine environment (playing basketball with his colleagues for instance), he remains collected in difficult situations and does not visibly display symptoms characteristic of IPV trauma. However, in accordance with patterns of behaviour in victims of abuse, he often blames himself for the problems (he cheated on his wife);<sup>15</sup> furthermore, towards the end of the episode he states that he "just want[s] some peace,"<sup>16</sup> indicating that he in fact is the victim of IPV.

The main characters vary greatly in their reactions. Detective Benson immediately believes the woman's allegation of rape (Benson's character is designed as the most supportive of female victims, and spousal rape committed by husbands against wives was and unfortunately still is a serious issue with a similarly long history of biases, prejudice and myths such as indicated by IAB's comments below); Detective Stabler, who – at this point of the series is still closer to the hard-boiled, masculine detective prototype but will achieve serious character growth later in the series – starts telling funny comments about marriage, Detective Munch emphasises the importance of following procedure, but it is implied that he does not believe the woman's rape allegations. Officers from the IAB (Internal Affairs Bureau) have a quite misogynistic reaction to the whole situation: "We marry them to keep it [sex] available, so tell me, how do you rape a wife?" (09:10). The husband's fellow officers act in quite a hostile manner towards the SVU squad, given that in their investigation their colleague is the alleged perpetrator. However, it is their conviction

---

<sup>14</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 2, episode 7, "Asunder," directed by David Platt, aired December 1, 2000, NBC, 35:03.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Reginaldo Espinoza Chase and Debra Warner. "Where do we go from here?: Examining intimate partner violence by bringing male victims, female perpetrators, and psychological sciences into the fold." *Journal of Family Violence*, 31, no. 8, (2016), 961: "Portrayals of female-perpetrated violence against males frequently represent the men as unfaithful or abusive."

<sup>16</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 2, episode 7, "Asunder," directed by David Platt, aired December 1, 2000, NBC, 36:20.



that he is the victim. In terms of legal consequences, the husband is found not guilty on the charge of rape, and even though the woman is arrested at one point for assault, it is the husband that bails her out – showcasing the recurring situation in IPV cases that the victim is incapable of breaking out of the violent situation.

### *December Solstice*

The next episode dealing with a male victim of intimate partner violence comes much later in the series, in season 16, titled “December Solstice.” Similarly to “Asunder” this one also depicts the ambiguous domestic situation of an elderly writer and his younger wife. It is the man’s daughters (from a previous marriage) who report the alleged abuse: they come to Detective Benson’s office and state that their father was raped, describing how Charmaine, the wife, gives their father erectile dysfunction drugs without his knowledge or consent – which is endangering his health given his heart condition. They argue that he is incapable of consent because of his progressing dementia. Furthermore, after he dies of heart-failure, the wife orders a procedure called post-mortem rectal probe electroejaculation so that she could have a child with her late husband.

Most of the detectives take the case seriously, but rather focus on the physical mistreatment (endangering his health) instead of the sexual component. However, Detective Amanda Rollins first reacts with an attitude that is a common stereotype and misconception about male victims of sexual abuse, namely that men can find enjoyment in being sexually assaulted. As Smith, Pine and Hawley state: “[t]he passivity and loss of control over the sexual interaction that occurs in sexual assault of men by women is so inconsistent with stereotypical beliefs concerning male sexual motivation and behavior that male victims are viewed as more likely to have encouraged the act and to have derived pleasure from it.”<sup>17</sup> The Detective comments: “is that a crime or an old man’s dream?”<sup>18</sup> implying that he must enjoy the regular intercourse with his wife. Furthermore, the medical examiner comments on the electro-ejaculation in a joking manner: “it looks she pulled something else out of him too”<sup>19</sup>, another common attitude especially among representations of male victims – making a joke out of the sexual abuse.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ronald E. Smith, Charles J. Pine and Mark E. Hawley. “Social cognitions about adult male victims of female sexual assault.” *Journal of Sex Research* 24, no. 1, (1988): 111.

<sup>18</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 16, “December Solstice,” directed by Sharat Raju, aired 25 February, 2015, NBC, 06:53.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 21:55.

<sup>20</sup> Chase and Warner. “Where do we go from here?” 962.

With reference to the representation of the spouses, it should be highlighted that the wife is played by Marcia Cross, who, in 2014 when season 16 of *SVU* first aired, had already been known for her character in *Desperate Housewives* as Bree van de Kamp, who is associated with killing a husband (even though she did not). Here she is depicted as uptight, strict, posh, but at the same time she also seems to care for her husband.

Walter Briggs, the elderly husband, has quite conservative notions of femininity and masculinity. He believes that spousal sex is a man's duty, according to him he had six wives and hundreds of lovers, and as he says "I penetrated their bodies and I penetrated their minds."<sup>21</sup> He is quite troubled that now he is taken care of by women (his wife, daughters, nurses and he even mentions the female judge presiding over his case). Most probably the idea that a woman can rape a man is inconceivable for him. As Scott-Storey et al emphasize, it is often difficult for men to perceive of their own victimhood, since the experience is highly in contrast with gendered notions and expectations of masculinity: "[i]t is theorized that in the context of IPV, pressure to fit with and adhere to dominant gender ideals not only influences men's sense of self, but also their own and others' appraisal and identification of the violence they experience."<sup>22</sup>

Once again, the episode shies away from explicitly depicting a female perpetrator of IPV and sexual violence, since the case is played down to a family feud: a 3 year-old video message resurfaces after his death in which he talks about how their mother turned his two daughters against Charmaine, and one of his daughters just wants to take revenge because her father hated the adaptation she wrote from one of his novels. The case is solved with a plea deal, and the IPV situation and sexual abuse are not resolved.

### ***What Can Happen in the Dark***

The first episode in *SVU* that openly deals with female perpetrated intimate partner and sexual violence came quite late, in season 22, aired in 2021. The episode takes place during the COVID lockdown, and portrays the victimization of a husband by his wife in many ways related to IPV situations: physical, verbal, sexual and even custodial abuse is part of the episode. The crime itself is not represented, as usual, only the consequences. The starting point of the events is when the husband collapses at home and we can see a bloodstain on his jeans around his bottom, indicating anal trauma. When the case comes to trial, he

---

<sup>21</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 16, "Asunder," directed by Sharat Raju, aired 25 February, 2015, NBC, 18:45.

<sup>22</sup> Kelly Scott-Storey et al. "What About the Men?" 860.

testifies that his wife yells at him, throws objects at him, even broke a bottle on his head, and demands sexual acts which make him uncomfortable.

The husband is represented in this episode as an unambiguous IPV victim. He is described by their nanny as gentle, sweet and too nice. He shows clear signs of trauma and victimisation: at the hospital he tells the doctor that he fell down the stairs and that is how he obtained his injuries (minimizing the seriousness of his trauma)<sup>23</sup>, he leans away from his wife and does not want to pursue the case. He is clearly terrified and wants to conceal the truth, however he slips up and reveals that his attacker is a woman. In connection with the IPV situation he is embarrassed, ashamed, says that it will not happen again, and that he is afraid that no one will believe him – notions that are very familiar from IPV situations with a female victim. It is also clear that his abuser has taken away his self-worth and ability to get out of the situation: when his wife tries to frame him as the abuser in the family he simply accepts it: “I did it. Whatever she said, I did it.”<sup>24</sup> During his testimony at court, when he is asked to share his memories about the sexual violence, he avoids certain words, and uses euphemisms to describe his experience: “I asked her to stop, but she just kept forcing that thing into me.”<sup>25</sup>

The wife in this episode is depicted as a clear-cut perpetrator. In terms of gender roles, she is bestowed with traditionally masculine features, as if a female perpetrator is only imaginable if she is a masculinized woman: she is the breadwinner of the family and she makes the decisions. When the investigation closes in on her, she tries to frame her husband as the attacker: she cuts her own neck, however, their son later reveals that she did it to herself. She also blames the victim: she implies that her husband might have caused the anal trauma himself during masturbation. It turns out that she threatens him with taking away his custodial rights, and she even tries to intimidate him during the trial via text messages: “You stupid bitch, I warned you. You’re nothing. A loser. A zero. By the time I’m through with you, you’ll never see Charlie [their son] again.”<sup>26</sup> In her representation, the show employs psychological and behavioral patterns that are usually associated with male abusers, however, as Chase and Warner point out, are also often characteristic of female perpetrators:

Psychological characteristics found in male batterers, including emotional dysregulation, jealousy, anxious and insecure attachment styles, controlling behaviors, impulsivity, antisocial behavior,

---

<sup>23</sup> Philip W. Cook. *Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence*. 2nd ed. Westport: Praeger (2009): 11.

<sup>24</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 22, episode 15, “What Can Happen in the Dark,” directed by Jean de Segonzac, aired 27 May, 2021, NBC, 17:54.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* 31:29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* 37:45.

and poor self-control, are also found in female batterers (Shorey, Brasfield, Febres, & Stuart 2011; Moffitt et al. 2001). Psychopathologies including mood disorders, posttraumatic stress, anger mismanagement, personality disorder or disturbance, and substance use disorders can impede the emotional and behavioral control of romantic partners and are among the most frequently cited issues among female perpetrators of IPV (Melander, Noel, & Tyler 2010; Dowd & Leisring 2008; Stuart et al. 2006; Simmons, Lehmann, Cobb, & Fowler 2005; Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt 2004).<sup>27</sup>

The treatment of the case is also quite revealing about male victims of intimate partner violence. When the identity of the perpetrator is unknown, the police officers are very friendly with the wife, however, if the genders were reversed and they were dealing with a female victim presenting with anal trauma, the first person of interest would be the husband. During the trial the wife's lawyer exhibits outdated attitudes around intimate partner violence, which have been – fortunately – superseded in terms of female victims: “it's a private matter, it's not a criminal one”<sup>28</sup> as if the gender of the victim acted as a time machine in terms of attitudes. He also brings up a common stereotype around male victims, namely the difference of strength: “Why didn't you just push her off you or off the bed?”<sup>29</sup> – even though researchers have widely refuted the validity of this argument.<sup>30</sup>

In the end the case is yet again resolved with a plea deal, the wife pleads guilty to misdemeanor assault and has to register as a sex offender, but there is no incarceration included. It is implied that the public is not yet ready to deal with male victims of IPV, so the jury's decision should be avoided with such a disappointing plea deal.

### Episodes on sexual assault outside of intimate relationships

The episodes of *Special Victims Unit* that pertain to sexual assault committed by female perpetrators against male victims outside of intimate partnership show a similarly sporadic pattern of appearance as those centered on intimate partner violence. Furthermore,

---

<sup>27</sup> Chase and Warner. “Where do we go from here?,” 962.

<sup>28</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 22, episode 15, “What Can Happen in the Dark,” directed by Jean de Segonzac, aired 27 May, 2021, NBC, 23:09.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 33:37.

<sup>30</sup> See Ronald E. Smith, Charles J. Pine and Mark E. Hawley. “Social cognitions about adult male victims of female sexual assault.” *Journal of Sex Research* 24, no. 1, (1988): 101–112 or Cat Munroe and Martha Shumway. “Female-Perpetrated Sexual Violence: A Survey of Survivors of Female-Perpetrated Childhood Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Assault.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 9-10 (2020): 1–21.

stereotypes and common misconception regarding female perpetrated sexual assault (FPSA) – such as erection means consent, ejaculation equals enjoyment or the difference in physical strength makes it impossible for a man to be raped by a woman – are voiced and often questioned in these episodes.

### ***Ridicule***

The first episode that deals with a male victim of rape committed by a non-intimate partner came in season 3, titled “Ridicule” – referring to how the police officers (not the SVU squad) reacted to the victim’s first report. According to him three women raped him at a bachelorette party where he worked as an escort:<sup>31</sup> they lured him into an empty bedroom, attacked him and cuffed him to the bed, then turned on loud music so no one would hear his screams. Since one of the women was found dead in her bedroom bound and asphyxiated, he becomes the primary suspect in the investigation.

Regarding the reactions of the SVU detectives, Stabler and Tutuola’s responses demonstrate common myths surrounding female perpetrated rape. Stabler believes that since the escort had an erection, it means consent, he brings up the victim’s physical strength and fitness and cannot understand why he did not fight back; furthermore he tries to find any circumstances that could have a mitigating effect such as the victim being drugged. His response is quite telling: “Should I have been? Do you need a reason why this happened to me? Why I wasn’t man enough to protect myself? Would that make you feel better?”<sup>32</sup> Detective Tutuola in his response – “Three women at the same time, most guys would call that lucky”<sup>33</sup> – combines two common attitudes around male rape victims. On the one hand his comment is meant to be funny, and as Chase and Warner point out, “[d]epictions of female-perpetrated IPV in heterosexual relationships, as well as real-life occurrences, are often recognized as humorous, including by males.”<sup>34</sup> On the other hand it implies that men are sexually driven beings and would never say no to sex – another common stereotype.

---

<sup>31</sup> Sex workers often have difficulties being heard as victims of sexual assault in the socially more believed context of male perpetrated sexual assault, whereas male sex workers are in an even more precarious position given that male sex work is more tabooed by society. On this topic see for instance Michelle Davies. “Male sexual assault victims: a selective review of the literature and implications for support services.” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 7, no. 3, (2002): 203–214 or Jenice Du Mont, Sheila Macdonald, Meghan White and Linda Turner. “Male Victims of Adult Sexual Assault: A Descriptive Study of Survivors’ Use of Sexual Assault Treatment Services.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 28, no. 13 (2013): 2676–2694.

<sup>32</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 3, episode 10, “Ridicule,” directed by Constantine Makris, aired 14 December, 2001, NBC, 17:20.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:33.

<sup>34</sup> Chase and Warner. “Where do we go from here?,” 961.

Their outdated and stereotypical responses are mitigated by Dr. Huang's explanations (he is a psychiatrist character and a permanent consultant for SVU). He practically teaches the two hard-boiled, macho-masculine detectives – and the audience – that men are taught not to be violent with women, to walk away from possibly aggressive situations including women, which deep-seated childhood lessons simply prevented the victim from physically trying to protect himself against his female assailants no matter the difference in bodily strength and fitness. It is not physical superiority that the rapist women employ against him, but psychological manipulation, which is often a characteristic of female perpetrated violence by women against men both in sexual assault and IPV situations. As Lindström argues “men are more often victims of psychological violence than physical violence.”<sup>35</sup> Similar arguments and counter-arguments are employed during the trial, which is included in the episode in great detail, however, in the end the perpetrators are found guilty only on the charge of assault and not rape.

The victim is visibly traumatized both by the attack and the cops' reaction when he first tried to report the assault, which is a widespread experience of victims of female perpetrated sexual assault: “FPSA victims report high levels of lifetime trauma, revictimization, and adverse mental health outcomes.”<sup>36</sup> He states that he cannot work as an escort any more, and when he is asked about the rape, he can only talk about it with his back to the detectives. He internalizes the myth that erection means consent, and clearly lacks the vocabulary to express female perpetrated rape. He is confused and ashamed that he had an erection, as he says: “I didn't want to, but my body ... I can't explain it.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Design**

The next episode that features adult male victims of sexual assault is “Design” from season 7, where a young woman drugs rich and successful men with rohypnol, and while they are unconscious, she collects their sperm with rectal probe electro ejaculation in order to deliver it to her delusional father's sperm bank, whose goal is to save humankind with “genius” sperm. Her actions constitute aggravated sexual assault given that rohypnol takes away the victims' ability to consent.

---

<sup>35</sup> Lindström. “Intimate Partner Violence against Men,” 1.

<sup>36</sup> Cat Munroe and Martha Shumway. “Female-Perpetrated Sexual Violence: A Survey of Survivors of Female-Perpetrated Childhood Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Assault.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 9–10 (2020): 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 3, episode 10, “Ridicule,” directed by Constantine Makris, aired 14 December, 2001, NBC, 18:28.

All together she had 34 victims, however, only a handful of them appear in the episode. Furthermore, since they cannot remember anything as a result of the drug, the case cannot be prosecuted, which can be interpreted as a comment on the blank spots of legislation and how difficult it is to create laws up-to-date with the abuse of ever developing technologies. The episode refrains from taking a stance in the ambiguous and difficult to prosecute case, and focuses more on the representation of the perpetrator and less on the victims and their experiences.

In terms of representing the female perpetrator, the episode does not take a clear-cut stance on her status either. She is introduced as a self-proclaimed victim of rape, who wants to commit suicide, because her assault resulted in pregnancy. However, it is revealed that she is manipulative, a compulsive liar, and believes that the rules of society do not apply to her. It is also hinted at that she might be a sociopath. However, the episode tries to soften this by her claims that her current mental status and behavior are consequences of her abusive childhood, because her mother consciously brought her up in a way so that she would not have empathy (for example she was not allowed to go to school to ensure that she does not “learn” empathy from other kids). Therefore her position as a perpetrator is questioned and it is implied that she is also a victim.

### ***Parole Violations***

The episode titled “Parole Violations” in season 16 centers around a female parole officer raping a male parolee at gunpoint. As opposed to the previous two episodes, here the offense takes place in the present of the episode. Furthermore, the beginning of the attack is depicted: the parole officer forces the parolee to do a urine test in front of her and threatens him with being sent back to prison upon refusal. There is absolutely no ambiguity in representing the offence, it is not questioned (at least not by the structure and representational strategies of the episode) that he is actually raped.

The victim is the fiancé of Detective Carisi’s sister, depicted as a big, clumsy guy with a problematic past – he is a parolee after all. Before going to his PO, he is visibly nervous, fearful even. After the attack he shows signs of severe trauma, relapses into alcohol and is arrested at a bar fight. He is afraid that no one would believe him, but remains consistent that he did not want to have sex with his parole officer: “She made me do her.”<sup>38</sup> In his description of the attack he expresses the forceful nature of the events, but uses the phrase

---

<sup>38</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 17, “Parole Violations,” directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC, 04:40.

“do her” to describe the sexual experience, which implies his active position and does not necessarily indicate rape. Lacking the vocabulary and trouble identifying himself as passive and a rape victim is a recurring experience of victims of FPSA: “[b]eyond difficulties in identifying experiences as IPV, when men do identify as victims, gender socialization may lead to a tendency for some men to minimize or trivialize experiences of IPV.”<sup>39</sup>

During the investigation it turns out that the parole officer had another victim as well, another parolee, who is a drug addict, and is under constant threat of being sent back to prison. He describes what happened to him as follows: “It’s like free sex I guess. I should feel lucky, right?”<sup>40</sup> However, his appearance makes it unambiguous that he does not feel lucky – he is rattled and on the verge of crying.

The perpetrator, a female parole officer, is depicted as a strong, bulky woman who is clearly in a position of power that she aggressively abuses. She is represented as quite masculine in her demeanor, as if it would not be imaginable that an average, feminine woman can commit rape. She tries to minimize the assault, stating that it was initiated by him: “He was ready, willing and able. Do you think a man could respond like that under duress?”<sup>41</sup>, invoking the usual stereotype that erection means consent:

It is commonly believed that men are incapable of functioning sexually unless they are sexually aroused. This assumption has been repeatedly cited in judicial decisions exonerating female defendants on the grounds that unless he were a willing participant, the male victim would have been incapable of engaging in sexual intercourse (Groth, quoted in Orman, 1985; Petrucelli, 1982). This assumption is called into question by evidence that men are capable of functioning sexually in a variety of intense emotional states, including fear and anger (Bancroft, 1980; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948), just as female victims sometimes report vaginal lubrication and orgasmic responses while being traumatically raped (Sarrel & Masters, 1982).<sup>42</sup>

In their reaction, the characters vary greatly. Detective Carisi at first reacts violently saying that he cheated on his pregnant sister, and believes that if he had an erection, he must have had at least some interest in the intercourse. He only comes around when the PO plants drugs in the victim’s apartment and upon finding them takes him back to prison. Towards the end of the episode he completely changes his initial skepticism and states: “[i]t

<sup>39</sup> Kelly Scott-Storey et al. “What About the Men?,” 860.

<sup>40</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 17, “Parole Violations,” directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC, 23:59.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 21:20.

<sup>42</sup> Ronald E. Smith, Charles J. Pine and Mark E. Hawley. “Social cognitions,” 103.



took a real man to get up in court and tell the truth like Tommy did”<sup>43</sup> emphasizing that the victim did not lose his masculinity as a result of female perpetrated sexual assault. Detective Rollins is quite skeptical as well, but Detective Amaro is sympathetic from the beginning. Detective Benson emphasizes that the reversed genders cannot take away the severity of the crime: “[w]e take this case as seriously as if it was a woman accusing a male PO.”<sup>44</sup> It is the victim’s fiancée who reacts the most negatively. She feels that she was cheated on, shares the attitude that erection means consent and even considers terminating her pregnancy.

Although the episode makes it clear that the crime is handled and viewed as an unambiguous rape case, in terms of a verdict there is no such clear-cut stance. In the end the case is handled with a plea deal, the parole officer gets 5 years of probation, has to register as a sex offender, but there is no jail time involved.

## Conclusion

Even though research suggests that female perpetrated IPV and sexual abuse outside of intimate relationships is far more frequent than the general public believes, it is an under-researched, often silenced and definitely underrepresented issue, made even more problematic by a lack of strict and gender neutral/inclusive legislation. As Turchik, Hebenstreit and Judson point out:

Although gender-inclusive sexual assault laws—laws where both men and women can be the potential victim and/or perpetrator—have recently been adopted by many countries and U.S. states (Rumney, 2008), there still exists a number of ways in which male victims and victims of same-gender violence are not protected. For instance, the rape of men is often not defined by law under the same terminology or degree of offense as the rape of women, may have different legal consequences, or may not be acknowledged as a prosecutable type of sexual aggression.<sup>45</sup>

As we could see, *Law and Order: SVU* provides some visibility to male victims of intimate partner violence and sexual violence in cis-hetero contexts, even though these

---

<sup>43</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 17, “Parole Violations,” directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC, 40:45.

<sup>44</sup> *Law and Order: SVU*, season 16, episode 17, “Parole Violations,” directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC, 10:47.

<sup>45</sup> Jessica A. Turchik, Claire L. Hebenstreit and Stephanie S. Judson. “An Examination of the Gender Inclusiveness of Current Theories of Sexual Violence in Adulthood: Recognizing Male Victims, Female Perpetrators, and Same-Sex Violence.” *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 17, no. 2 (2015): 134.

episodes constitute a tiny minority among the more than 500 different sex offenses depicted during the seasons. *SVU* not only depicts the existing myths, stereotypes and attitudes surrounding these male victims, but often questions them as well, and provides education for the audience about female perpetrated IPV and sexual abuse.

## References

Carlyle, Kellie, Jennifer A. Scarduzio, and Michael D. Slater. "Media Portrayals of Female Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29, no. 13, (2014): 2394-2417. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260513520231>

Chase, Reginaldo Espinoza and Debra Warner. "Where do we go from here?: Examining intimate partner violence by bringing male victims, female perpetrators, and psychological sciences into the fold." *Journal of Family Violence*, 31, no. 8, (2016), 959-966. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-016-9881-4>

Cook, Philip W. *Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence*. 2nd ed. Westport: Praeger, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798216188391>

Coxell, Adrian W. and Michael B. King. "Male victims of rape and sexual abuse." *Sexual and Marital Therapy*, 11, no. 3 (1996): 297-308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02674659608404443>

Davies, Michelle. "Male sexual assault victims: a selective review of the literature and implications for support services." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 7, no. 3, (2002): 203-214. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1359-1789\(00\)00043-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1359-1789(00)00043-4)

Du Mont, Jenice, Sheila Macdonald, Meghan White and Linda Turner. "Male Victims of Adult Sexual Assault: A Descriptive Study of Survivors' Use of Sexual Assault Treatment Services." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 28, no. 13 (2013): 2676-2694. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260513487993>

Dziewa, Amandine and Fabienne Glowacz. "Getting out from Intimate Partner Violence: Dynamics and Processes. A Qualitative Analysis of Female and Male Victims' Narratives." *Journal of Family Violence* 37, no. 4 (2022): 643-665. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-020-00245-2>

Law and Order: SVU, season 2, episode 7, “Asunder,” directed by David Platt, aired December 1, 2000, NBC, 35:03.

Law and Order: SVU, season 3, episode 10, “Ridicule,” directed by Constantine Makris, aired 14 December, 2001, NBC.

Law and Order: SVU, season 7, episode 2, “Design,” directed by David Platt, aired 27 September, 2005, NBC.

Law and Order: SVU, season 16, episode 16, “December Solstice,” directed by Sharat Raju, aired 25 February, 2015, NBC

Law and Order: SVU, season 16, episode 17, “Parole Violations,” directed by Jill Abbinanti, aired 25 March, 2015, NBC.

Law and Order: SVU, season 22, episode 15, “What Can Happen in the Dark,” directed by Jean de Segonzac, aired 27 May, 2021, NBC.

Lindström, Ronja. “Intimate Partner Violence against Men. A Systematic Review of How Definition, Study Characteristics and Quality Affects Prevalence. Master’s Thesis, Project in Criminology, Malmö University, Faculty of Health and Society, Institution of Criminology, Malmö, Sweden (2018): 3. 1-25.

Munroe, Cat and Martha Shumway. “Female-Perpetrated Sexual Violence: A Survey of Survivors of Female-Perpetrated Childhood Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Assault.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37, no. 9-10 (2020): 1-21  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520967137>

New York Penal Law. 130. Sex offenses (§§ 130.00-130.96). <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/laws/PEN>

Scott-Storey, Kelly, Sue O’Donnel, Marilyn Ford-Gilboe, Colleen Varcoe, Nadine Wathen, Jeannie Malcolm and Charlene Vincent. “What About the Men? A Critical Review of Men’s Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence.” *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 24, no. 2. (2023): 858-872. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211043827>

Smith, Ronald E., Charles J. Pine and Mark E. Hawley. "Social cognitions about adult male victims of female sexual assault." *Journal of Sex Research* 24, no. 1, (1988): 101-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224498809551401>

Tilbrook, Emily, Alfred Allan, and Greg Dear. *Intimate Partner Abuse of Men*. Perth: Men's Advisory Network, 2010.

Tsui, Venus. "Male Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse: Use and Helpfulness of Services." *Social Work*, 59, no. 2 (2014): 121-130. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swu007>

Turchik, Jessica A., Claire L. Hebenstreit and Stephanie S. Judson. "An Examination of the Gender Inclusiveness of Current Theories of Sexual Violence in Adulthood: Recognizing Male Victims, Female Perpetrators, and Same-Sex Violence." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 17, no. 2. (2015): 133-48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838014566721>