

METHODOLOGY FOR ASSESSING THE SEMANTIC ORIENTATION OF VICTIMHOOD

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Abstract

The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of victimology theory and its semantic transformation, tracing its development from philosophical and criminological foundations to the complex psychological and socio-cultural domains. It highlights a paradigmatic shift in the perception of the victim—from being defined by objective external factors to being understood as a multidimensional psychological phenomenon shaped by the interaction between unconscious intrapersonal processes and prevailing social norms.

A study conducted within the Armenian societal context aims to explore the psychological components underlying the perception of victimhood. Particular attention is given to deeply rooted stereotypes and defence mechanisms that influence victim perception, underscoring the significance of both social and individual factors in shaping victim-related attitudes.

The article places particular emphasis on the interaction between the victim's psychological state, self-perception, and external environmental responses—an interplay that deepens the contextual understanding of victimhood. The findings suggest that perceptions of victim vulnerability are shaped through the dynamic interplay of socio-cultural norms and individuals' internal psychological processes. Moreover, the data reveal distinct gender-based patterns in responses to victimhood, underscoring the role of gender as a significant variable in shaping attitudes toward victims. Women tend to approach victims with greater empathy and understanding. In contrast, men more frequently exhibit critical or dismissive attitudes toward vulnerability—responses often linked to varying manifestations of psychological defence mechanisms. These differences provide a critical foundation for developing gender-sensitive support strategies that integrate both psychological and social approaches.

Finally, the article emphasises the importance of conducting further research involving participants from diverse age groups, which would enable a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the perception of victimhood. Such an approach could facilitate the optimisation of support mechanisms by considering both societal and psychological characteristics and needs.

This study makes a significant contribution to contemporary scientific exploration of victimhood, as it may inform the development of innovative strategies for understanding and supporting victims. These approaches aim to enhance psychological well-being, grounded in the principle that a mentally healthy individual constitutes the cornerstone of a healthy society and stable social relationships.

The theoretical and practical strategies developed within this research are crucial for helping victims regulate and maintain emotional stability, facilitating their self-expression and social integration. Consequently, these strategies can significantly enhance the effectiveness of social support systems and promote overall mental well-being.

Keywords: Victimhood, semantic orientation, victim perception, gender differences, self-expression, defence mechanisms.

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«Անանիա Շիրակացի» միջազգային հարաբերությունների
համալսարանի հասարակայնության հետ կապերի մասնագետ,
լրատվական կայքի խմբագիր,

ՀՀ ԳԱԱ գիտակրթական միջազգային կենտրոնի հայցորդ

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Համառոտագիր

Հոդվածում համակողմանիորեն վերլուծվում է վիկտիմության տեսության զարգացումը և նրա իմաստային ձևափոխությունները՝ սկսած փիլիսոփայական ու քրեագիտական հիմքերից մինչև հոգեբանական և սոցիալ-մշակութային բազմաշերտ ոլորտներ: Արտացոլվում է զոհի ընկալման անցումն օբյեկտիվ արտաքին ազդեցություններից դեպի առավել բարդ, բազմաչափ հոգեբանական երևույթ, որը ձևավորվում է անհատի անգիտակցական գործընթացների և սոցիալական նորմերի փոխազդեցությամբ:

Հայ հասարակության շրջանում իրականացված հետազոտությունը միտված է վիկտիմության ընկալման հոգեբանական բաղադրիչների բացահայտմանը: Մասնավորապես, ուշադրության կենտրոնում են գոհի ընկալման վրա ազդող կարծրատիպային արմատացումներն ու պաշտպանական մեխանիզմները, որոնք ընդգծում են ինչպես սոցիալական, այնպես էլ անհատական գործոնների նշանակությունը:

Հոդվածում առանձնահատուկ շեշտադրվում է գոհի հոգեբանական վիճակի, ինքնընկալման և արտաքին միջավայրի արձագանքների փոխազդեցության կարևորությունը, ինչը հնարավորություն է տալիս խորացնել գոհի համատեքստային ընկալման գիտակցումը: Հետազոտության արդյունքները ցույց են տալիս, որ գոհի խոցելիության ընկալումը ձևավորվում է սոցիալ-մշակութային նորմերի և անհատի ներքին հոգեբանական դինամիկայի փոխազդեցության արդյունքում: Բացի այդ, տվյալները վկայում են, որ գոհ լինելու երևույթի նկատմամբ կա սեռային տարբերակված արձագանք: Կանայք հակված են ավելի կարեկցանքով և ըմբռնմամբ մոտենալ գոհին, մինչդեռ տղամարդկանց մոտ հաճախ դիտարկվում է խոցելիությունը ժխտող և քննադատական վերաբերմունք, որը կապված է պաշտպանական մեխանիզմների տարբեր դրսևորումների հետ: Այս տարբերությունները կարևոր հիմք են սեռային զգայուն աջակցման ռազմավարությունների մշակման համար՝ համադրված հոգեբանական և սոցիալական մոտեցումներով:

Վերջապես, հոդվածում առանձնացվում է տարիքային տարբեր խմբերի մասնակցությամբ հետազոտությունների կարևորությունը, ինչը հնարավորություն կտա վիկտիմության ընկալման մասին առավել ամբողջական և բազմաշերտ պատկերացում կազմել: Այս մոտեցումը կօգնի օպտիմալացնել աջակցության մեխանիզմները՝ հաշվի առնելով թե՛ հասարակական, թե՛ հոգեբանական առանձնահատկություններն ու կարիքները:

Այս ուսումնասիրությունը կարևոր ներդրում է վիկտիմության ժամանակակից գիտական ուսումնասիրման ոլորտում, քանի որ այն կարող է նպաստել գոհի ընկալման և աջակցման նոր ռազմավարությունների մշակմանը: Նման մոտեցումները ձգտում են բարձրացնել հոգեբանական առողջության մակարդակը՝ հիմնվելով այն սկզբունքի վրա, որ հոգեպես առողջ անհատը առողջ հասարակության ու կայուն հասարակական հարաբերությունների անկյունաքարն է:

Հետազոտության շրջանակներում մշակված տեսական և կիրառական ռազմավարությունները կարևոր դեր են խաղում գոհի հուզական վիճակի վերահսկողության ու կայունության պահպանման, ինքնաարտահայտման և սոցիալական ինտեգրման գործընթացներում, ինչն, իր

հերթին, կարող է նպաստել սոցիալական աջակցության համակարգերի արդյունավետության բարձրացմանն ու հոգեկան բարեկեցության ամրապնդմանը:

Քանալի բառեր՝ վիկտիմություն, իմաստային կողմնորոշում, զոհի ընկալում, սեռային տարբերություն, ինքնարտահայտում, պաշտպանական մեխանիզմներ:

Introduction

Contemporary societies are transforming multilayered and rapidly unfolding socio-economic, political, and cultural changes. While these shifts open up new avenues for development, they simultaneously give rise to deepening social contradictions. Within this dynamic context, the protection of the individual as a social subject—ensuring their safety and safeguarding their dignity—has become an increasingly urgent concern. As a result, the protection and assurance of human rights have emerged as critical areas of scholarly inquiry. Within this framework, the phenomena of victimhood and victim perception are examined as complex socio-psychological constructs.

Victimhood refers to situations in which an individual becomes the target of physical, psychological, social, or legal harm. Historically, the study of victimhood has been largely confined to the criminological field, focusing primarily on crimes and their legal consequences. However, in recent decades, inquiries into victimhood have considerably expanded to include psychological and sociological approaches. Victimhood is now understood not only as a legal status but also as a subjective experience expressed at perceptual, emotional, and behavioural levels. It may manifest in overt cases of violence as well as in more subtle forms, such as psychological trauma and social marginalisation.

In this context, the societal nuances of victimhood perception, the lack of clear delineation of culpability, and entrenched stereotypes are increasingly emphasised, all of which complicate the protection of victims and undermine the effectiveness of support systems. From a psychological perspective, the interaction between the victim's self-perception and external responses often hinders the recovery process.

Consequently, there arises a need to develop a novel approach grounded in a multilayered and comprehensive understanding of victimhood—one that incorporates psychological, social, and individual factors. Such an approach would enable the reinterpretation of public perceptions and institutional responses, fostering victim-centred and restorative strategies. These strategies have the potential to enhance the efficacy of support systems by addressing the actual needs and lived experiences of victims.

The study aims to analyse the theoretical and applied foundations

of victimology, with particular attention to the multilayered concept of victimhood, gender-specific characteristics of victim perception, societal stereotypes, and their accompanying psychological mechanisms, to develop effective, victim-centred support strategies.

The central research questions guiding this inquiry include:

- What are the core psychological components of victimhood, and how do they shape the victim's self-perception?
- How do gender differences influence attitudes toward victims when psychological and social factors are jointly considered?
- What are the stereotypical foundations of victim perception within contemporary society?
- How do psychological and social factors interact in shaping the perception of victimhood?
- What strategies are essential for the development of victim-centred and restorative support systems?

The article places particular emphasis on the victim's psychological state, self-perception, and the interaction with responses from the external environment, highlighting the importance of a contextual understanding of victimhood.

A new perspective is presented on the psychological understanding of victimhood as an interconnected outcome of social and personal factors, which is essential for developing more comprehensive and informed support strategies.

Theoretical and methodological bases

The term «victimology» etymologically derives from the Latin word *victima*, meaning «victim.» As a scientific discipline, victimology emerged in the mid-twentieth century within the field of criminology. However, as early as the 19th century, the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, renowned for his critique of religion and humanistic thought, addressed the phenomenon of sacrifice (Feuerbach, L. 1841), interpreting it as the alienation of man from his own essence. According to Feuerbach, humans become the victims of their own created ideas and systems. This understanding, rooted in the alienation and tension between an individual's identity and their constructed values, can be considered a fundamental philosophical premise of the concept of victimhood.

Initially developed as a subfield of criminology, victimology has over time evolved into an independent scientific discipline, expanding its scope of study to include not only crime victims but also the socio-psychological profile of the victim, as well as manifestations of victimhood in state, political, cultural, and symbolic spheres. A special place in this is occupied by the

psychological component, which, according to Frank (Frank, 1975), genuinely contributes to the deepening and development of the structure of victimology. One of the fundamental terms in victimological science is the concept of “victimisation,” which was introduced into the legal literature by L. W. Frank (Frank, 1975). By “victimisation,” he means the process of transforming a person into a real victim or the outcome of such a process.

Benjamin Mendelsohn is considered one of the founders of victimology. He was among the first to formulate the theoretical principles of “victimology,” developing terminology derived directly from the word “victim.” One of his most significant contributions is the concept of “victimogenic predisposition.” Mendelsohn notes that every individual possesses a particular vulnerability to becoming a victim, which is conditioned by their psychological, physical, and social characteristics. From this perspective, becoming a victim is viewed not only as a random or solely externally influenced legal status but also as an internal predisposition. This predisposition is expressed through behavioural patterns, emotional responses, and social attitudes that may contribute to involvement in harmful relationships or situations (Mendelsohn, 1976, pp. 8–28).

Sigmund Freud’s contribution to victimology is invaluable and central to the study of victim psychology. Although he did not explicitly develop a theory of victimisation, his insights on trauma, intrapsychic conflicts, and defence mechanisms have profoundly shaped victimological research (Freud, 1905; 1920). Freud introduced key concepts such as repetition compulsion—the unconscious reenactment of trauma—and repression, where painful memories are pushed into the unconscious but later resurface as stress or anxiety. This framework underscores the complex interplay between psychological processes and social perceptions, deepening our understanding of victimhood and guiding effective prevention and psychological support strategies.

Thus, the ideas of both Mendelson and Freud are crucial in understanding victimhood not merely as a legal or social phenomenon, but as a psychological process shaped by internal vulnerability, the experience of trauma, and underlying mental mechanisms. These approaches have culturally influenced the development of the idea that being a victim is not merely a social reality but a deeply psychological process involving the experience of trauma, disruption of self-perception, and internal struggle on the path to recovery.

Psychological approaches provide an important foundation for the multilayered understanding of victimhood. However, a comprehensive conceptualisation of the victim’s role remains incomplete without a criminological analysis—one that examines the victim’s behaviour, social roles, and systemic responses within the context of the offence. Therefore, it is essential to return to the field of victimology by examining the theoretical principles formulated during the early stages of its development—principles

that enable a cross-sectional evaluation of both the victim's individual factors and the impact of the legal and socio-political environment.

From the very inception of criminal victimology and the development of victimological science, two opposing approaches have emerged regarding the nature of the crime victim and the assessment of their role in the context of unlawful acts. According to the first approach, "Some individuals attract the criminal like a lamb attracts a wolf" (Tarraukhin, 1974, p. 13). In this case, primary emphasis is placed on the biological aspects of the relationship between the offender or perpetrator and the victim, particularly the victim's specific genetic predisposition. According to the second perspective, the victim's behaviour is considered only one of the factors influencing the emergence and execution of the criminal plan. In this case, behaviour is not linked to genetic code or the biological inheritance of the individual; instead, it is emphasised that biological inheritance does not determine a person's specific behaviour, since personality and behaviour are shaped by the social structure of society and the environment in which the individual is raised.

D. Rivman offers an alternative conceptualization of victimhood, arguing that it should be understood as an individual's inherent predisposition to becoming a victim of crime under certain circumstances, or as the person's inability to resist the offender—accompanied by a range of factors that render this inability either objective (independent of the victim) or leave it at a subjective level of "unwillingness or incapacity" (Rivman, 1988, p.14).

Referring to V. Polubinsky's viewpoint, Rivman states: "They become victims of such criminal attacks not simply because they are individuals, but because of their specific official position, service, or social status, and socially beneficial behaviour" (Rivman, 1988, p. 13).

The relationships linking the offender to the victim, as well as the situations preceding and accompanying the crime, express only personal or role-based victimisation, which either create or, conversely, reduce the prerequisites for the commission of the crime. Thus, we begin to recognise that victimisation must be examined from a broader perspective, involving not only social factors but also psychological ones. This phenomenon represents a transition from criminological and sociological approaches to psychological theories, wherein the victim's or injured party's influence, behaviour, and inner world become critically important.

Andrew Karmen, Professor of Sociology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, in his studies and analyses, arrives at the assumption that victims are individuals subjected to adverse effects such as harm or hardship resulting from the illegal actions of a person or group of people (Karmen, 2012). Karmen's studies follow the criminological perspective that victimisation is primarily associated with the consequences of offenders' actions. However, Engel's

theory (Engel, 1977), which increasingly integrates psychological knowledge, introduces a new trend that views victims as individuals affected by major catastrophic events, such as crimes or natural disasters. Thus, we observe that victimology's focus progressively adapts to explanations related to the emotional and psychological states of the victim.

Engel's theory had a significant impact on the development of modern psychology and victimology, particularly in shaping the understanding that the victim's condition is determined not only by external events but also by the individual's internal resources—namely, the degree of emotional and psychological resilience. Engel's approach subsequently influenced the development of the view that the impact of victimisation encompasses not only physical but also psychological suffering. This phenomenon began to be understood not merely as a consequence of physical harm but as mental health-related challenges, necessitating prompt psychological support for victims. This shift from criminology to psychology helped clarify that the victim's condition can and should be addressed through comprehensive psychological assistance and treatment.

Thus begins the intersection of victimology and psychiatry. Hans von Hentig, one of the early scholars to study crime victims, addressed not only criminological but also psychological dimensions, proposing that victims, as active subjects, engage in a dynamic interaction with the offender. Hentig identified specific vulnerable groups—such as the elderly and women—whose lower levels of psychological and social preparedness thus increase the likelihood of becoming a victim (Hentig, G., 1948, pp. 303–309).

Furthermore, as Henry Ellenberger notes, the combination of social and psychological factors can lead to situations in which an individual becomes both offender and victim. This theory, which emphasises the harmony between both social environment and internal psychological factors, effectively conveys that in such interactions, an individual's identity is shaped not only by external causes but also by internal psychological reasons (Ellenberger, H., 1954). Thus, this development demonstrates that not only external factors shape the offender or the victim, but also internal psychological structures.

The importance of protecting victims' rights at the international level is also emphasised in the development of victimology. The United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, adopted in 1985, places special emphasis on the protection of victims' rights, expressing the notion that the rights to public, property, and personal security are among the most fundamental human rights. This document not only formalizes the role and significance of victimology but also helps to illustrate the process by which victimology transcends criminological science and begins to study broader phenomena, including psychological and socio-psychological resources.

In the 1990s, studies by Wetzels and colleagues (Wetzels, P., Ohlemacher, et al., 1994) sharply emphasised the socio-psychological significance of victimhood, considering it not only a criminal act but also a consequence of psychological and emotional suffering. This emphasis directly pertains to the individual's inner world—his or her fear, sense of vulnerability, and diminished self-esteem. Recent developments have contributed to the emergence of the idea that the victim should be evaluated not only based on objective damages but also on the way the individual perceives their victimhood, regardless of external reality. In other words, it is crucial to pay attention to the individual's subjective perception through which they assess their experienced trauma and suffering. This approach highlights that victimhood encompasses not only physical or material harm but also emotional, psychological, and social suffering, which the individual may experience and interpret in diverse ways.

Thus, over several decades, victimology has gradually evolved from a criminological perspective into a comprehensive system of psychological and socio-psychological approaches. The phenomenon of victimhood has undergone an evolutionary process over time, particularly within the psychological domain, where it has become a more inclusive field of study and application.

Nowadays, numerous studies in this field focus on elucidating the psychological foundations of victimhood, its various manifestations, and the associated social consequences. In “The Language of Victimisation: Toward an Understanding of Deviant Victims,” the author (Jennifer L. Dunn, 2010) explores victimhood as a socially constructed, dynamic process involving existential disruption and identity reconstruction beyond mere harm or violence. As a subsequent development, Symons, Hellemans, and colleagues (Symons, K., Hellemans, et al., 2016) demonstrate that early family abuse increases the risk of later sexual victimisation, mediated by psychological factors like low self-esteem, broken trust, and trauma. Expanding the conceptual scope, Pratt and Turanovic (2021) in “Revitalising Victimisation Theory” propose a multidimensional framework that includes psychological, emotional, and social harms, such as discrimination, thereby deepening our understanding of the impact of victimhood on identity and social status. Finally, in the article “Victimisation as a Transformative Experience” (Pemberton, Mulder, et al., 2024), through a phenomenological lens, victimhood is interpreted as an existential rupture and a transformative meaning-making process, highlighting how victims can develop resilience and renewed self-awareness beyond their suffering.

In “Evolution, Cognitive Sciences, and Victimology,” identify self-mastery as a core function of victimhood and stress the need to explore related cognitive skills like intelligence and reasoning, linked to education, work, and age (Gajos and Butwell, 2024). In “A Systematic Review of Risk Factors for Intimate

Partner Violence,” the authors examine social, developmental, psychological, and relational factors, finding that age, gender, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics influence the risk of domestic violence victimisation and perpetration (Kim, Joo, et al., 2025).

Research methods

This study employed a combined methodological approach, incorporating both theoretical analysis and empirical data collection through a structured survey method. The sample consisted of individuals aged 26 to 64, classified within the “middle adulthood” stage according to Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development. The total sample included 100 participants ($n = 100$), evenly divided by gender—50 males and 50 females.

The survey was conducted anonymously and in a self-administered format to ensure participants’ freedom and to collect unbiased data. The primary aim of the study was to identify the specific characteristics of victim perception, taking into account gender differences and the psychosocial traits of the target group. Additionally, the study aimed to analyse the role of psychological defence mechanisms associated with these perceptions.

Results

Numerous psychological studies highlight that analysing the perception of victimhood and the associated public attitudes is essential for both preventing victimisation and designing effective psychological support systems. How victimhood is perceived profoundly shapes societal responses, which can range from empathy and readiness to offer assistance to blame, denial, or indifference.

In light of the significance of these issues, the present study was designed to examine the characteristics of victim perception as influenced by gender within specific age groups. The target population comprised individuals in the middle adulthood stage of psychosocial development, as defined by Erik Erikson, encompassing ages 26 to 64 and including both women and men.

Erik Erikson’s theory posits that individual development unfolds across the entire lifespan in distinct stages. Each stage is marked by a psychosocial crisis, the successful resolution of which facilitates the stabilization of identity, the awareness of one’s social role, and the establishment of interpersonal relationships (Erikson, 1996, p. 92).

Within this framework, the present study focuses specifically on the stage of middle adulthood (ages 26–64), as this phase is critical for the formation of social maturity, moral-psychological responsibility, and an individual’s system of attitudes toward others. These characteristics provide a substantive foundation for a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying victim perception.

Attitudes toward victims often reflect an individual’s psychological state, revealing the extent to which they are willing to support or protect those facing difficult circumstances. At the core of this research lies the analysis of public perceptions, which plays a crucial role both in the prevention of victimhood and in the development of effective psychological support systems.

Perceptions of victims within society influence social responses—including positive or negative attitudes, caregiving behaviours, and the formulation of support strategies—and frequently mirror the individual’s psychological defence mechanisms. These mechanisms enable the reorganization of internal psychological conflicts and facilitate the individual’s integration within the social environment. Consequently, they shape behavioral patterns and interpersonal relationships related to victim identity.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the distinctive features of victim perception across different genders within society and to explore the role of psychological defence mechanisms associated with these perceptions in the formation and development of social responses, attitudes, care, and support strategies. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial, as they may contribute—albeit subtly yet significantly—to shifting public attitudes and enhancing the effectiveness of interventions aimed at preventing and supporting victimhood.

The selected characteristics function as a reflective mirror of societal attitudes. Descriptors such as “kind,” “forgiving,” or “educated” carry positive connotations and represent traits highly valued and encouraged within cultural contexts. Conversely, terms like “cowardly,” “weak-willed,” or “dissatisfied” convey negative undertones, reflecting behavioural models regarded as undesirable or unsuccessful socially. Additionally, attributes indicating perceived physical or social vulnerability—such as “weak” or “insecure”—highlight facets of victim perception grounded in vulnerability. The choice of these descriptors reflects not only individual viewpoints but also broader cultural norms, social expectations, and value orientations.

The indicators illustrate the relationship between various characteristics associated with victim perception and gender, expressed as percentages (Table).

Table.

Victim Perceptions among Women and Men Aged 26–64

Age group: 26–64	Cowardly	Dissatisfied	Modest	Kind	Insecure	Non- confrontational	Weak (physically)	Forgiving	Weak-willed	Educated
Women	9 %	10%	8 %	11%	12%	11%	12%	9%	13%	5%
Men	4%	14%	12%	15%	10%	11%	8%	13%	10%	3%

The research findings revealed several interesting patterns and differences. Below are some of these, presented in the context of gender and characteristics attributed to the victim.

Cowardice– Women (9%) significantly more often attribute the trait “cowardly” to the victim profile compared to men (4%). This finding may suggest that women are more willing to acknowledge and recognize fear—whether their own or others’—as a legitimate human vulnerability or difficulty inherent in the victim identity. Women appear more inclined to accept the “vulnerable” persona, which can manifest as cowardice, and may be more open to the understanding that a victim characterized by cowardice might struggle to resist or recover, as such fear reflects their emotional states and internal psychological fluctuations.

Conversely, men (4%) are less likely to perceive cowardice as part of the victim’s profile. This tendency may be explained by prevailing perceptions within male viewpoints that victims are expected to demonstrate resilience and strength. Within this framework, fear is not only deemed undesirable for a “strong” individual but is also interpreted as a sign of weakness, reflecting dominant societal stereotypes.

Kindness– Men (15%) are more likely than women (11%) to attribute “kindness” to the victim. This may stem from men’s perception of the victim as obedient and emotionally open, where kindness is linked to submissiveness and passivity. This aligns with cultural norms that portray the victim as passive, non-reactive, and ethically positive but lacking self-protection. Women also associate kindness with the victim, but often view it as a sign of vulnerability, seeing it as a feminine trait that reflects fragility. These gender differences in interpreting kindness reflect the impact of gender role socialisation, shaping cultural views of kindness and its connection to vulnerability and social value.

Insecurity– The analysis revealed that women (12%) are more likely to label the victim as “insecure” than men (10%). This may reflect women’s greater sensitivity to vulnerability, possibly due to social or psychological factors. Women might identify with the victim’s lack of self-confidence based on personal experiences. In contrast, men, influenced by societal norms linking self-confidence with masculinity, are less likely to attribute “insecurity” to the victim. These gender differences highlight how social roles and gender socialisation shape perceptions of vulnerability and influence trait attributions.

Physical Weakness– Women (12%) are more likely than men (8%) to attribute “physically weak” to the victim, suggesting that women are more attuned to perceiving the victim as physically vulnerable or unable to protect themselves. This perception may reflect women’s heightened sensitivity to vulnerability, particularly in terms of physical safety. On the other hand,

men (8%) are less likely to associate physical weakness with the victim, likely due to societal expectations that emphasise physical strength and self-defence as masculine traits. These cultural norms limit the acceptance of physical weakness in men's perceptions, leading to fewer attributions of this characteristic to victims.

Forgiving– Men (13%) more often associate the trait “forgiving” with the victim than women (9%), viewing it as a sign of submission and compliance. Women (9%) also see the victim as forgiving, but with an emphasis on the victim's active role in fighting for their rights and seeking change.

Educated– Women (5%) are more likely than men (3%) to attribute the trait “educated” to the victim. This may suggest that women are more inclined to view the victim as an informed, autonomous individual actively seeking to change their circumstances. Such perceptions reflect women's greater focus on cognitive resources and personal strengths to overcome challenges. In contrast, men (3%) are less likely to attribute “educated” to the victim, potentially due to societal expectations that prioritise physical strength, experience, and action over intellectual traits like education. This reflects different cultural value priorities in how knowledge and autonomy are assigned to the victim.

Discussion

The results of our study partially corroborate previous investigations into the conceptual orientations of victimhood, while revealing a notable association between victim perception and Freudian defence mechanisms. Specifically, our findings suggest that unconscious processes such as projection, denial, repression, and other defence mechanisms frequently operate as psychological tools through which individuals externalise and manage their own vulnerabilities and internal conflicts within the framework of victim representation. Women more regularly attribute the trait of “cowardice” to the victim, which may reflect an identification with the victim or an acceptance of vulnerability. In contrast, men tend to reject this perception, perceiving fear as contradictory to their masculine identity. They may view fear or vulnerability as unacceptable and avoid associating with such characteristics. Women also more often attribute “physical weakness” or “insecurity” to the victim, which may be related to the mechanism of projection. As the gender generally considered more sensitive, women may project their own fears and insecurities onto the victim, perceiving these traits as a form of limitation that amplifies collective vulnerability. Men, who are socially expected to be “strong,” may resort to reactive formation by exhibiting behaviours of strength and confidence to counterbalance their inner vulnerabilities. This defence mechanism may lead men to deny the “cowardly” trait, as it conflicts with societal norms tied to their masculine roles. The traits attributed to victims

by men and women—such as “insecurity,” “weakness,” “forgiveness,” and “weak-willed”—often highlight fears and emotions that are suppressed or overlooked through repression as a way to deny their own vulnerability or anxiety. These defence mechanisms contribute to the differentiation of the victim’s image, clarifying the social and psychological realities that underlie gender-based distinctions in perception. Consequently, men’s perceptions tend to be dominated by critical, submissive, and sombre characteristics, often expressed through projection and repression. In contrast, women’s perceptions are characterized more by empathetic and accepting attitudes, reflecting a higher degree of social restraint and internal emotional regulation.

Such mechanisms warrant further exploration—by analysing each attributed trait separately, especially within the gender context, it becomes possible to uncover multilayered defence mechanisms and subconscious psychological factors that are not immediately visible but profoundly influence perceptions and reactions. All these psychological adjustments and gender differences are crucial for understanding how sexual discourses and internal psychological mechanisms shape the perception of the victim’s image. They not only reflect the traits ascribed to the victim but also reveal how an individual’s gender identity intervenes in their subjective and social evaluations. These realities suggest that attitudes toward victims often serve as expressions of deeper fears, suppressed emotions, and the structure of identity. Therefore, it is essential to develop approaches that engage victims with psychological sensitivity and inclusiveness—avoiding the reproduction of gender stereotypes and transforming support into a more compassionate and human-centred process. These reflections open new avenues for research, proposing that many important layers can still be revealed through a deeper analysis of the interaction between gender, identity, and vulnerability.

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of victimhood demonstrates that the concept has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from predominantly objective and social frameworks to incorporate a more nuanced psychological dimension. While earlier understandings framed victimhood primarily as a condition shaped by external circumstances, contemporary perspectives emphasise the role of subconscious processes, psychological defence mechanisms, and both individual and collective perceptions. This evolution has broadened the study of victimhood into an interdisciplinary and comprehensive scientific domain, integrating insights from both sociology and psychology.

Our study continued the exploration of the psychological components of victimhood perceptions, focusing specifically on the gender-specific

features of victim perception and prevailing social stereotypes, with particular attention to defence mechanisms. It was revealed that the perception of the victim's vulnerability is shaped not only by social norms and cultural representations but also through unconscious psychological processes within the individual. These psychological factors elucidate the framework within which society perceives the victim as a multifaceted social and psychological phenomenon. The findings demonstrate that gender characteristics have a significant influence both on the formation of victim perceptions and on the varying manifestations of responses. Women tend to exhibit a more open and patient attitude toward vulnerability, reflected in their capacity to view the victim as a complex, nuanced, and empathetic figure. In contrast, men's perceptions incline toward a harsher, more passive, and less change-accepting approach, grounded in images of strength, resilience, and stability. The results of the study indicate that men and women attribute different characteristics to the image of the victim, employing distinct defence mechanisms shaped by socio-cultural norms and societal expectations. In this process, one's own vulnerabilities, fears, or desired behaviours are often denied, concealed, or projected onto the victim through these defence mechanisms.

Considering these factors, the findings underscore the need for further research that includes diverse age groups and other sociodemographic categories to enrich the understanding of perceptions and to reveal new psychological mechanisms. This is especially important in the context of contemporary social changes and multifaceted influences, as they significantly shape both societal and individual attitudes toward victims. The study's results demonstrate that social and psychological perceptions of victimhood encompass a variety of factors; however, they are based solely on data from specific groups. The generalizability of these findings to other populations requires further research that considers age, gender, and sociodemographic differences.

Nevertheless, the results hold substantial potential, though their universal applicability will demand further studies that provide a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological and social dimensions of victimhood.

By embracing this multilayered perspective, it becomes feasible to develop targeted interventions that facilitate the reduction of victimhood at both individual and community levels, while simultaneously enhancing the formulation of effective strategies for assistance and psychological support.

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