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Mass rape (France): Gisèle Pelicot is a non-stereotypical rape survivor - her case could make a real difference to others

Tuesday 26 November 2024, by [TOBIN Tadgh](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2024).

The mass rape trial that shook France is [entering its final phase](#) after ten weeks. But its implications for how we think about sexual violence and who experiences it will last much longer.

Gisèle Pelicot, 72, testified to her ex-husband's repeated, long-term sexual abuse. Dominique Pelicot admitted in November 2020 to drugging his then wife over nearly a decade, and recruiting dozens of other men to rape her. There are 50 other men on trial beyond Pelicot's ex-husband.

Gisèle Pelicot decided to waive her right to anonymity, which victims of sexual offences are entitled to in France. In doing so, she has opened the door on a tough conversation about rape in relationships and marriages. As this case exemplifies, the realities of sexual violence can be very different from what people consider to be ["typical"](#).

The stereotypical rape (and other sexual offences broadly) involves a lone, young, attractive, female victim being attacked by a male [stranger](#), at night, in a public place. The attacker may use a weapon, and the victim resists the attack physically.

[Very few cases](#) meet all of these criteria, and most cases are [drastically different](#). For example, many survivors of rape may be male, older or disabled. Their attackers may be people they know and trust or may be charming and generous, and the attack may take place behind closed doors. For female victims, the [most commonly reported](#) perpetrator is an intimate partner (46%), and for male victims, it is an acquaintance (38%).

Pelicot is an older survivor, victimised in her own home by her former husband and others she knew. This is far departed from the "stranger danger" stereotype and speaks to a harsh reality that most cases of sexual violence occur between people who know each other, and within private spaces - often the perpetrator's or victim's home.

If a victim does not feel they meet the typical criteria for rape or sexual assault, they may [minimise their own experience](#) or not realise what has happened. This experience is especially prevalent in cases of marital or relational abuse and among male victims, where survivors may not realise their consent was important or needed for sex to occur.

As a result, non-stereotypical survivors are less likely to seek support following their victimisation and are sometimes more likely to experience [negative outcomes](#) in their physical, mental and sexual health.

Believing victims

Victims or cases that are different to the stereotype can often be discounted, experience [shame](#), [guilt](#) and [victim blaming](#) from others, including the justice system.

[Research has shown](#) that non-stereotypical cases of sexual violence are more likely to be [disbelieved or discounted](#), and that their cases are more likely to [result](#) in a not guilty verdict. [Male](#), [disabled](#), and [older](#) survivors of rape or sexual assault are [less likely to report](#) or disclose their experiences to the police or social circles because of a fear of not being believed or treated well.

Many victims, stereotypical or not, have [negative experiences](#) when seeking help or disclosing. These cases are less likely to be [taken on by the police](#) and victims face more barriers to accessing support through sources such as [domestic abuse charities](#).

Video

Having [positive experiences](#) when disclosing their experience, either socially or with the police, has been found to greatly improve victim outcomes and post-traumatic growth. It also makes them more likely to seek support and report [future incidents](#). It is important to treat all survivors with the same degree of belief and respect, even if they do not fit your idea of what rape or sexual assault victims “should” be.

Anyone can be a victim of sexual assault. Gisèle Pelicot’s case, while extreme in its nature, is a landmark. She has become a feminist hero in France, and rightly so. Her willingness to speak openly about her experiences is already helping dispel stereotypes about who experiences domestic or sexual abuse, and how they are expected to act.

This conversation must continue, to increase the likelihood that more victims will access the support they need and, if they report or disclose, that the experience will be positive and supportive one.

If you or someone you know has been affected by sexual assault or rape, you can contact [Rape Crisis England and Wales](#), [Survivors UK](#) or [SafeLives](#).

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