

Rape Myth Acceptance: Gender and Cross-National Comparisons  
across the United States, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria

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## Abstract

Many studies indicate that rape-supportive beliefs persist and influence sexually aggressive behaviors and hostility toward women. Despite the plethora of studies, cross-cultural knowledge remains sparse. The present study examined rape myth acceptance across gender and countries (i.e., United States, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria). An online questionnaire was administered to a convenience sample of 699 respondents in the four countries. Results suggested that respondents in Nigeria were the most likely and respondents in United States were the least likely to endorse rape myths. Respondents in South Africa were less likely than respondents in Ghana to endorse the myth that the female victim of rape “asked for it” and that the male perpetrator “didn’t mean to” rape the female victim. Although men were more likely than women to endorse rape myths, female respondents in Nigeria endorsed the myths “she asked for it” and “he didn’t mean to” more than did male respondents in Nigeria. In general, exposure to various patriarchal structures and ideologies; differences in preventive, protective, and punitive policy responses to gender-based violence; repressive cultural and religious practices; reinforcement of demeaning stereotypes against women; and psychological assimilation of oppressive policy, values and beliefs might be attributed to cross-national differences. Cross-country differences in rape myths suggest the need for formal and informal intervention in vulnerable countries. International transfer of effective policies and programs for combating gender-based violence in protective countries might lead to considerable changes in vulnerable countries and help to shift the focus from patriarchal to egalitarian views of women.

**Keywords:** rape myth acceptance; rape; gender-based violence; patriarchy; violence against women

## **Introduction**

Across societies, women remain the major victims of sexual violence and targets of rape in all types of situations and relationships. Although many reasons have been attributed to this increasing victimization, a frequently recurring culprit remains sexually oppressive beliefs (Hust et al., 2019; Yapp & Quayle, 2018), which are believed to influence how women are perceived and treated (Seabrook et al., 2019; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). A strand of these oppressive beliefs has been regarded as rape myths, which are a constellation of “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). As a chronic vestige of patriarchal structures and ideologies, rape myths influence judgment about victims of sexual violence and have implications for reporting, preventing, or prosecuting sexual violence against women. Several studies in various countries have examined rape myths (e.g., Barnett et al., 2018; Carroll et al., 2016; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Hammond et al., 2011) but little is known about cross-cultural studies in developed and developing countries, particularly countries from Sub-Saharan Africa. This article describes the outcome of a study that examined rape myths across countries (i.e., the United States, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria) and gender. The study is based on the premise that differences in exposure to different patriarchal structures and ideologies may have different effects on endorsement of oppressive behaviors, beliefs, and stereotypes (Fakunmoju & Bammeke, 2017; Hunnicutt, 2009).

### **Rationale for cross-national examination of rape myth acceptance**

Several reasons may provide the rationale for examining rape myth acceptance (RMA) across countries and gender. The first relates to limited comparative knowledge of rape myths between countries despite considerable studies conducted in individual countries. In fact, what is

known about rape myths is derived from studies conducted in developed societies, particularly the United States. Research outside the United States is sparse (Yapp & Quayle, 2018). For example, a recent meta-analysis of 37 studies on acceptance of rape myths (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) examined only studies conducted in North America. Only a few studies have compared rape myths across countries. Among the few cross-cultural studies, comparisons have focused on countries with similar development and egalitarian ideals and principles. Comparative knowledge between developed and developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa is yet to be examined. Cross-cultural studies can determine whether exposures to different patriarchal structures and ideologies have different effects on endorsement of rape myths and whether societies in different stages of development and gender inequality differ in rape myths.

The second reason relates to the need to examine rape myths between countries that are homogenous and diverse. By examining countries that are racially, socially, and geographically homogenous and diverse, it is possible to understand the effects of unique experiences in those societies on rape-supportive beliefs. Understanding those effects might generate insights that would be useful for determining regions that may benefit from international transfer of policies and programs for addressing prevalence of rape and sexually oppressive beliefs.

The third reason relates to the association of rape myths with psychosocial factors that are critical to understanding violence against women. For example, rape myths have been associated with propensity for sexual violence, coercion, and bystander responses (Hust et al., 2019; Yapp & Quayle, 2018), hookup culture (Reling et al., 2018), sexual dysfunctional beliefs (Barnett et al., 2017), objectification of women (Seabrook et al., 2019), and differentiation of rapists from nonoffenders and nonsexual offenders (Johnson & Beech, 2017). Rape myths have also been associated with sexually aggressive behaviors and blame attribution to victim (van der Bruggen

& Grubb, 2014), agreement with patriarchal gender attitudes (Caldara, 2018), negative attitudes toward women (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), beliefs about sexual submissiveness of women, emotional stereotypes about women, sexual stereotypes about men (Fakunmoju et al., 2016), and religiosity (e.g., being Roman Catholic or Protestant; Barnett et al., 2018). Knowledge about factors associated with rape myths is beneficial to cross-national comparisons in many ways. Such knowledge may enhance reflection on how and why rape myths persist across regions and may help to identify regions where the risk for pervasive sexually oppressive beliefs is high. It also may help to determine where direct and indirect multimodel policies and measures for addressing rape myths would be more beneficial and feasible.

### **Similarities and differences among the examined countries**

The four countries that were examined were carefully chosen because of their relevance to the purpose of the study, unique location in the North American and African continents, and similarities and differences in social and economic development (Fakunmoju et al. 2015; Fakunmoju and Bammeke 2017). The United States is a developed North American country with a multicultural and racially diverse population. It is known for its endorsement and pursuit of egalitarian values and principles, with better access to the labor force and political participation by women (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2018). South Africa is a middle-income developing southern African country with a multicultural and racially diverse population (Fakunmoju and Bammeke 2017; Fakunmoju and Rasool 2018; UNDP, 2018). It has a unique history of apartheid and is known for its prevalence of rape; it is sometimes arbitrarily dubbed the “rape capital of the world” (South Coast Herald, 2018), similar to war-torn Congo.

Although the USA had an annual estimated victimization rate of rape at 2.1 per 1,000 females age 12 or older in 2010 (Weigel, n.d.) and 41.7 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017 (Statista,

n.d.), these rates are not as high as those in South Africa, where a recent report indicated a rate of 70.5 per 100,000 people in 2017/2018 (Africa Check, 2018). Although reliable official statistics of rape in Nigeria and Ghana are lacking, results from studies indicate that the rate is high in both countries. For example, out of 108 respondents who reported experience of sexual harassment/victimization on the campus of a university in Nigeria, 35 (32.4%) reported having been raped (Ogbonnaya et al., 2011). In past (2005) and recent (2016) surveys in Ghana, between 8% and 9% of female respondents reported a lifetime experience of rape (Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2005; Institute of Development Studies [IDS], Ghana Statistical Services [GSS], & Associates, 2016).

In more recent years, a large number of social scientists have pointed to what they call *rape culture* as the basis of analysis for how people see rape in the United States (Brown, 2018). In the United States, rape culture is distinct from the main culture; the mixture of patriarchy with pursuit of egalitarian ideals and legal consequences of rape make rape culture less permissive and less appealing. In South Africa, the patriarchal culture influences participation in rape on an extreme scale. As a result, the rape culture cannot be separated from the main culture itself, as rape is an integral part of cultural values and beliefs that define years of subjugation and colonial institutionalization (Buiten & Naidoo, 2016). South African culture has integrated rape as a viable form of power and masculine dominance. Unlike the United States and South Africa, Ghana and Nigeria are low-developing West African countries with a racially homogenous population but diverse ethnic and tribal backgrounds. Both countries have a history of colonialism, as well as pervasive and prevalent gender-based violence. Policies in both countries are influenced by religious and cultural values rather than by human rights and egalitarian

principles (Ako-Nai & Obamamoye, 2018), although the situation appears to be more pervasive in Nigeria than in Ghana. South Africa and Nigeria are major economies in Africa.

Despite some shared cultural values among South Africa, Nigeria, and Ghana, there are unique differences. For example, increasing policy and program initiatives in South Africa address gender-based violence, whereas similar efforts in Ghana and Nigeria have been accorded only lip service. In South Africa, there is increasing access by women to the labor force and political participation post-apartheid (Yakubu, 2010), whereas women continue to have limited access to the labor force and political participation in Ghana and Nigeria (Ako-Nai & Obamamoye, 2018). English is an official language in all four countries. Patriarchy characterizes the social structure of the four countries, although manifestations and vestiges of patriarchy vary across them.

### **Effects of country on rape myth acceptance**

Studies comparing respondents across countries or national backgrounds have noted differences in endorsement of rape myths. For example, Stephens et al. (2016) compared RMA among college students in the United States, Japan, and India and found that “U.S. and Japanese students were less likely to disbelieve rape claims . . . while U.S. students also were less likely to believe that victims are responsible for rape” (p. 1). Another study found that respondents in India accepted rape myths to a greater extent than did respondents in Great Britain (Hill & Marshall, 2018). Yet another study determined that Indian students were more likely to agree with rape myths than were students in the United Kingdom (Barn & Powers, 2018).

Studies that compared respondents across backgrounds within the same country also found differences in endorsement of rape myths. For example, in a study comparing Greek college students versus non-Greek college students, it was determined that Greek students

endorsed rape myths more than did non-Greek students (Canan et al., 2018). Similarly, Matthews and colleagues (2018) explored RMA among undergraduate social work Southern African students in Namibia and identified the student's nationality to be related to differences in RMA: Participants from Zimbabwe were less likely to endorse rape myths than were those from Namibia, Nigeria, Zambia, or the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Both within and between countries, differences in endorsement of rape myths, as well as factors associated with endorsement of rape-supportive attitudes, continue to be noted. For example, Kalichman et al. (2005) found rape myths to be “endorsed by a significant minority of both men and women” in South Africa (p. 299), a finding that supports the recent claim that “acceptance of gender inequality and rape [is] common among” adolescent males (Lankster, 2019, p. 129). In Ghana, Rominski and colleagues (2017) noted that university students endorsed rape myths at a higher level, while Boakye (2009) found gender, education or profession, and age to be associated with endorsement of rape myths. In Nigeria, a recent systematic review found “male gender, gender role socialization, exposure to pornography, fraternity membership, ambivalent sexism, narcissistic personality” to be associated with rape-supportive attitudes (Obierefu & Ezeugwu, 2017, p. 141). Gender (Fakunmoju et al. 2019) and masculinity (Obierefu & Ojedokun, 2019) were also found to be associated with rape-supportive beliefs in that country.

In contrast to the few studies on rape myths conducted in South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria, a plethora of studies has been conducted in the United States. A recent systematic review of the studies identified “association between RMA and self-reported sexual violence” (Yapp & Quayle, 2018, p. 1). A similar meta-analysis indicated that “men displayed a significantly higher endorsement of RMA than women. Rape myth acceptance was also strongly associated with hostile attitudes and behaviors toward women” (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010,



p. 2010). Despite these studies in individual countries, cross-cultural studies that compare respondents from Sub-Saharan Africa with respondents from developed societies are sparse in the body of empirical research.

### **Effects of gender on rape myth acceptance**

Studies have noted differences not only within and between countries but also between males and females in endorsement of rape myths. In studies in the United States, men were more likely than women to endorse rape myths (Barnett et al., 2018; Carroll et al., 2016; Chapleau et al., 2008; Grubb & Turner, 2012), a finding that has been supported by meta-analysis (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Studies conducted outside the United States have also noted gender differences in endorsement of rape myths. Using the revised Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance (IRMA) scale with student respondents in Ghana, it was found that female students were more likely than male students to reject rape myths (Rominski et al., 2017b). Using the IRMA scale with respondents in Nigeria (Fakunmoju et al. 2019) produced similar results. In addition to gender, some studies noted that some variables are critical to understanding RMA. For example, being male, being young, and having less education were associated with endorsement of rape myths (Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2015). A study conducted in a South African university found that women who had experienced gender-based violence tended to reject rape myths more than women who had not had such experience, whereas White men who had had a similar experience of gender-based violence demonstrated a higher propensity to accepting rape myths than those who had not had such an experience (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2018).

While studies in other countries (e.g., Kenya, India) validate the proclivity of men to endorse rape myths and to attribute blame to female victims of rape (Mittal et al., 2017; Tavrow et al., 2013), a study in South Africa identified few differences between males and females in

their endorsement of rape myths (Kalichman et al., 2005). A study in India indicated that female students tended to accept rape myths more than did male students (Jayalakshmi et al., 2016). Interestingly, studies in other African and Arab countries have indicated women's support for rape myths and violence against women. For example, a study conducted in rural Tanzania indicated that most men were less supportive of rape myths than were women (Abeid et al., 2015), a finding that is similar to what was found in Uganda, where more women (90%) than men (70%) justified sexual violence against women (Michael, 2003). In an Arab nation that holds a more restrictive view about women, findings from Kuwait indicated that women highly endorsed rape myths more than men (Nayak et al., 2003). Despite these findings in each country, cross-cultural validity of gender differences in endorsement of rape myths across countries remains elusive in empirical research.

### **The present study**

In consideration of the above review, the following research questions were developed:

Research question 1: Are there differences in endorsement of rape myths (i.e., “she asked for it,” “he didn’t mean to,” “it wasn’t really rape,” and “she lied”) across countries (i.e., United States, South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria)?

Research question 2: Does endorsement of rape myths differ by gender?

### **Materials and method**

#### ***Design***

A convenience sample of 787 participants from the United States ( $n = 154$ , 19.56%), South Africa ( $n = 107$ , 13.59%), Ghana ( $n = 333$ , 42.31%), and Nigeria ( $n = 193$ , 24.52%) completed a survey (a) online, using SurveyMonkey.com™, or (b) in paper-and-pencil format. In the United States, professionals in organizations and public education (i.e., teachers, guidance

counselors, and administrative staff) in a MidAtlantic state completed the survey. The link was also shared with undergraduate and graduate students at a university in a northeastern state. Through informal access respondents (i.e., administrative staff) in a private organization in south central region completed the survey. Respondents were encouraged to share the link with colleagues, friends, and others on their address list. In South Africa, the link to the survey was shared with respondents through the address list of colleagues and volunteers. Verbal solicitation of respondents in apartment complexes and internet cafes in a major metropolitan city was sought by providing the link to potential respondents who agreed to complete the survey. Participation was also sought via social media (i.e., Facebook).

In Ghana, the link to the survey was shared with students, teaching, and administrative staff at two universities in two regions of the country. Through the address book of volunteers the link was also shared with respondents willing to participate in the study. Participants were encouraged to share the link with others who might be interested in participating. To increase participation in a region where access to the Internet was limited, a paper version of the survey was administered to groups of respondents who were recruited from the communities. Preliminary analysis indicated that those who completed the survey online did not differ significantly in endorsement of rape myths from those who completed the paper version. Previous studies have described the equivalency of this dual methodology (Gosling et al., 2004; Lewis et al., 2009; Weigold et al., 2013) and some studies have utilized both approaches for data collection (Buchanan & Smith, 1999; Olatunji et al., 2015; Stanton, 1998).

In Nigeria, participants (i.e., students, nonstudents, administrative staff etc.) were recruited at universities in three southwestern regions and outside the universities via Internet cafe operators. Using the address link of investigators and volunteers and verbal solicitation, a

link was sent to potential respondents, who were encouraged to share it with others. Additional information about the study in Nigeria was reported in a previous publication by Fakunmoju et al. (2019). The Institutional Review Board of Westfield State University, Massachusetts approved the study.

### ***Participants***

Participants ( $N = 699$ ) were from the United States ( $n = 148, 21.2\%$ ), South Africa ( $n = 80, 11.4\%$ ), Ghana ( $n = 290, 41.5\%$ ), and Nigeria ( $n = 181, 25.9\%$ ; Table 1). There were more female ( $n = 371, 53.1\%$ ) than male ( $n = 328, 46.9\%$ ) participants. The majority were Blacks/non-White ( $n = 610, 87.3\%$ ) versus Whites/Caucasians ( $n = 89, 12.7\%$ ), with an average age of 32 years ( $SD = 10.64$ ). The majority reported their marital status as single ( $n = 409, 58.5\%$ ) versus married, married but separated, divorced, or widowed ( $n = 290, 41.5\%$ ). Although there were more nonstudents ( $n = 474, 67.8\%$ ) than students ( $n = 225, 32.2\%$ ), more respondents reported having a high school diploma or Associate degree ( $n = 310, 44.3\%$ ) than a Bachelor's degree or Higher National/Advanced Diploma (HND;  $n = 264, 37.8\%$ ) or Master's or doctoral degree ( $n = 125, 17.9\%$ ).

### ***Measures***

The updated IRMA scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; see also IRMA-SF, Payne et al., 1999) is a 22-item measure of rape-supportive beliefs that are clustered in four subscales: (a) "She asked for it," (b) "He didn't mean to," (c) "It wasn't really rape," and (d) "She lied." Examples of items: "If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped" and "If a girl doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it can't be considered rape." Response choices, using a Likert-type scale, ranged from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. Lower scores indicate agreement and higher scores indicate disagreement

with rape-supportive beliefs. Previous studies have reported Cronbach's alpha for the measure ranging from .74 to .91 (Fakunmoju et al. 2016b; McMahon, 2010; Payne et al., 1999). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha was as follows: "She asked for it" .86, "He didn't mean to" .92, "It wasn't really rape" .90, and "She lied" .88.

### **Analysis**

Preliminary attempts were made to identify duplication and identical responses by cross-checking the Internet Protocol (IP) address with survey responses. No identical responses or duplicate data were identified. Demographic variables were dichotomized and categorized for descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the demographic characteristics of respondents. A 4 (country: United States, South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria) x 2 (gender: female, male) between-subjects two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with four dependent variables (i.e., "She asked for it," "He didn't mean to," "It wasn't really rape," and "She lied") was used to determine whether RMA differed by country and gender (Hypotheses 1 and 2). To control for Type I error, Bonferroni correction was used to test each univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) at the .0125 level (for country). Similarly, the Bonferroni correction was used to control for Type I error for examined pairwise comparisons in follow-up analyses, with the alpha level set at .004. Only findings that were less than (or equal to) these alpha levels were considered significant. Ipsative mean imputation method was used to address missing data. After applying the method, 699 cases remained for analysis. SPSS 20™ (IBM Corp., 2011) was utilized to analyze the data.

### **Results**

Using Pillai's Trace, there was a statistically significant multivariate main effect of RMA (a) by country,  $V = .431$ ,  $F(12, 2070) = 28.95$ ,  $p < .0005$ , and (b) by gender,  $V = .028$ ,  $F(4, 688)$

= 5.01,  $p = .001$ . The interaction effects of country and gender were nonsignificant. Results of tests of between-subjects effects suggested that country had an effect on “She asked for it” ( $F[3] = 100.97$ ;  $p < .0005$ ), “He didn’t mean to” ( $F[3] = 91.05$ ;  $p < .0005$ ), “It wasn’t really rape” ( $F[3] = 84.34$ ;  $p < .0005$ ), and “She lied” ( $F[3] = 41.72$ ;  $p < .0005$ ), and that gender had an effect on “It wasn’t really rape” ( $F[1] = 11.39$ ;  $p = .001$ ), and “She lied” ( $F[1] = 16.74$ ;  $p < .0005$ ). The effects of gender on “She asked for it” and “He didn’t mean to” were nonsignificant, ( $F[1] = 6.05$ ;  $p = .014$ ) and ( $F[1] = 7.29$ ;  $p = .007$ ), respectively.

### **Effects of country on rape myth acceptance**

In response to Research Question 1, respondents differed across countries in endorsement of rape myths (i.e., “she asked for it,” “he didn’t mean to,” “it wasn’t really rape,” and “she lied”). The average scores on RMA in the United States were significantly higher than the average scores in South Africa, Ghana, or Nigeria (Table 2). Specifically, respondents in the United States were less likely to endorse rape myths than were respondents in South Africa, Ghana, or Nigeria. Similarly, the average scores on “she asked for it” and “he didn’t mean to” in South Africa were significantly higher than the average scores in Ghana. Specifically, respondents in South Africa were less likely to endorse the myth that the female victim of rape “asked for it” and that the male perpetrator “didn’t mean to” rape the female victim than were respondents in Ghana. The average scores on RMA in Nigeria were significantly lower than the average scores in the United States, South Africa, or Ghana. Specifically, respondents in Nigeria were more likely to endorse rape myths than were respondents in the United States, South Africa, or Ghana.

**Effects of gender on rape myth acceptance**

In response to Research Question 2, the average scores of male respondents on the IRMA were significantly lower than the average scores of female respondents (Table 3). Specifically, male respondents were more likely than female respondents to endorse rape myths. However, it is noteworthy that female respondents in Nigeria had lower mean responses for “she asked for it” and “he didn’t mean to” than male respondents in Nigeria, thereby suggesting that female respondents might be predisposed to endorsing the myths that the female victim of rape “asked for it” or that the male perpetrator “didn’t mean to” rape the female victim.

**Discussion**

This cross-sectional study examined country and gender differences in RMA and found differences across countries (respondents in the United States were least likely to endorse rape myths, whereas respondents in Nigeria were most likely to endorse rape myths) and gender (men were more likely than women to endorse rape myths).

***Effects of country on rape myth acceptance***

The finding that respondents in the United States were less likely than respondents in the other examined countries to endorse rape myths is consistent with previous reports. For example, Stephens et al. (2016) found that respondents in the United States endorsed rape myths at a lower rate than did respondents in Japan or India. A similar study found that respondents in the United States were less likely to endorse partner violence (Fakunmoju et al. 2015) and to hold a higher perception of abusive behaviors against children (Fakunmoju et al. 2013) than respondents in Nigeria. These findings are not surprising, as the United States is known for its pursuit of egalitarian values and ideals at a higher level than the other studied countries. Although the recent disclosure of past mistreatment of women and subsequent emergence of the #MeToo

movement gives a painful reminder that the vestige of patriarchy persists in the United States, the vicious effects of patriarchy are generally tamed through gender-based programs and policies (e.g., The Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and establishment of the Office on Violence against Women in the U.S. Department of Justice) that are formally implemented and enforced. These policies and programs have implications for rape-supportive perceptions and behaviors in the United States, compared to other countries that have been examined.

Empirically speaking, studies in the United States indicate that rejection of rape myths is high (Barnett et al., 2018; Carroll et al., 2016; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Hammond et al., 2011), suggesting a strong disagreement with rape-supportive beliefs. Despite vestiges of patriarchy in the United States, the country's endorsement of human rights and egalitarian principles might be perceived as playing a consistent role in the high rejection of sexually oppressive behaviors and beliefs. Women in the United States have access to the labor force and political participation, are economically independent from men, and enjoy legal protection from domestic violence. Rape and sexual crimes are consistently investigated and culprits are increasingly prosecuted, and men are increasingly exposed to egalitarian values—a reality that far exceeds the experience of men and women in the other countries examined in this study. These realities have implications for differences in endorsement of rape myths between respondents in the United States and those in the other countries. However, it must be acknowledged that the pursuit of egalitarian values attributed to the United States seems to undermine the reality of victimization experience of women in the country. Increasing rate of domestic and sexual violence against women, notwithstanding the low reporting rates, suggests that the attributed pursuit of egalitarian values is better conceived in principles than practice, since the plight of women in the United States appears to be worse than acknowledged in the comparisons with examined countries.



Beyond the finding that respondents in the United States were the least likely to endorse rape myths, findings also indicated that respondents in South Africa were less likely than respondents in Ghana to endorse the myth that the female victim of rape “asked for it” and that the male perpetrator “didn’t mean to” rape the female victim. Despite South Africa being dubbed “the rape capital of the world” (*South Coast Herald*, 2018), its respondents’ rejection of rape-supportive beliefs is noteworthy. Several factors may be attributed to this: increasing awareness, publicity and media attention on rape, enforcement of legal consequences of rape, increasing low tolerance for rape, and education and enlightenment campaign on rape. These contrast with results in Ghana, where similar protective measures on sexual violence against women are minimal and incidents of rape attract little or no publicity or consequences. It is possible that these measures in South Africa are having a positive impact on perception of rape and rape-supportive beliefs. It also is possible that they are increasingly instrumental in lower incidence of attribution of blame to female victims of rape and declining exoneration of perpetrators of rape.

Unlike the low proclivity of respondents in United States to endorse rape-supportive beliefs, findings suggest that respondents in Nigeria were more likely to endorse rape myths than respondents in the other countries. This finding is important, as it extends previous findings regarding the propensity of respondents in Nigeria to endorse partner violence and gender-based violence beliefs and stereotypes (Fakunmoju et al. 2015; Fakunmoju et al. 2016a, b).

In Nigeria, rape and sexual violence against women are prevalent (Ezechi et al., 2016; Ohayia et al., 2015), a reality that is encouraged by oppressive cultural values and religious beliefs. Oppressive control of sexuality in women and permissive enablement of sexuality in men have negative implications for reporting, believing, and responding to rape of women (Aborisade, 2014; Fakunmoju et al. 2019). For example, in Nigeria, a man is believed to have

sexual rights over his wife and a woman is supposed to be sexually submissive to her man; men are believed to have a high appetite for sex and, as a result, have a right to force their women to have sex; and women are expected to dress modestly in ways that are not sexually provocative (Fakunmoju et al. 2019). It is not surprising that 34% of Nigerians attributed rape to indecent dressing (Information Nigeria, 2013). These beliefs have implications for how victimization and perpetration of rape are perceived and who is blamed for its occurrence.

More problematic in Nigeria are the effects of media, television, and Nollywood movies on propagation and reinforcement of oppressive stereotypes and beliefs against women. For example, many contents of Nollywood movies reinforce traditional gender roles of women and convey subliminal messages of violent consequences for failure to comply with instructions of men or for violating the established rules of engagement in relationships (Okenwa-Emegwa et al., 2016; Omoera et al., 2017). These culturally embraced values and beliefs have serious implications for how respondents in Nigeria interpret behaviors of rape victims and view perpetrators of rape.

### *Effects of gender on rape myth acceptance*

The finding that men were more likely than women to endorse rape myths is consistent with previous studies that have consistently found men to be more likely than women to endorse rape myths and sexually violent behaviors and stereotypes (Fakunmoju et al. 2015, 2016a, b, 2019; Fakunmoju and Bammeke 2017; Barnett et al., 2018; Boakye, 2009; Carroll et al., 2016; Grubb & Turner, 2012; Hammond et al., 2011; McMahon, 2010; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Rominski et al., 2017a; Tavrow et al., 2013). A cursory look at patriarchy may explain men's propensity across cultures to deny, justify, normalize, and trivialize sexual violence and to consider female victims of rape to have lied about the experience of rape. Across societies, men

are socialized into gender roles that devalue women and elevate men. The perception of men as breadwinners and head of family engenders superior feelings in men that are often instrumental to perception of ownership of female sexuality, problematic and violent relationships with women, prolonged insensitivity to the experience of women, and superficial intimacy with women (Fakunmoju et al., 2019). Internalization of patriarchal values and beliefs through socialization affects how men label the experience and behaviors of women and how men rationalize and normalize their behaviors to the extent that the sexual victimization experience of women becomes trivialized and sexual behavior of men becomes justified. Patriarchy instills in men the tendency to evaluate sexually violent behaviors from patriarchal values rather than from human rights and egalitarian perspectives. It is therefore possible to expect men to be more likely than women to endorse rape-supportive beliefs.

Although patriarchy instills a sense of domination in men, it does not necessarily trigger a sense of rebellion or resistance in women. Instead, it instills counterproductive effects of psychological assimilation of violence in women, leading women to become the moral police and protector of oppressive patriarchal values and beliefs (Fakunmoju et al. 2016a, b; Fakunmoju and Bammeké 2017). This psychological assimilation is particularly evident in the responses by female participants in Nigeria, who had lower mean responses for “she asked for it” and “he didn’t mean to” compared to male respondents. This finding is consistent with previous studies in South Africa (Kalichman et al., 2005), India (Jayalakshmi et al., 2016), Tanzania (Abeid et al., 2015), Uganda (Michael, 2003), and Kuwait (Nayak et al., 2003), where women and female students were found to be more likely than men and male students to endorse rape myths or gender-based violence.

The lower mean responses by women for “she asked for it” and “he didn’t mean to,” compared to mean responses by men, in Nigeria is conceivable when psychological effects of cultural values and religious beliefs on women are taken into consideration. In Nigeria, women are socialized into desirable sexual behaviors and purity. While men are generally believed to be sexually indiscriminate, women are expected to compensate for sexual indiscretion of men through sexual purity. As a result, women are likely to judge more harshly any female behavior that compromises chastity in women than any behavior that validates the perceived sexual indiscretion of men. By default, women are socialized to assume the role of moral police of sexual behaviors of fellow women while normalizing the sexual behaviors or indiscretions of men. It is therefore not surprising that “women who violate traditional gender roles are attributed more blame than those women who do not” (Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 443).

Unequivocally, assimilated oppressive values and beliefs inherent in patriarchy instill a sense of powerlessness in women to the extent that the need to avoid the potential consequences of antagonizing the existing social structure may predispose women to strive to maintain the status quo and to lend support to oppressive systems that are disadvantageous to them. It is possible that the concerned women perceived that the female victim deliberately provoked the rape out of the need for attention or that the male perpetrator, like every man, was incapable of controlling his sexual urge when aroused. It also is possible that the women endorsed the myths to undermine any victimization excuses of the female victim and to protect the male perpetrator from punishment or potential consequences of rape.

### **Strengths and limitations**

This study has strengths as well as limitations. A major strength of the study relates to its being the first known to examine country and gender differences in RMA between developed

and developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa from the perspective of development and exposure to a range of patriarchal structures. By providing cross-cultural knowledge on rape-supportive beliefs, the study provides critical background information that may be helpful in framing policy and practice measures on rape and sexual violence against women across regions. Similarly, despite the challenges associated with online collection of survey data, the use of the platform enhanced anonymity of responses and wider coverage of respondents, both critical to the validity of findings (Fakunmoju and Bammeke 2017). The use of the online platform was equally helpful in preventing response bias and data entry errors.

In spite of the above strengths, some limitations are acknowledged. It is evident that reliance on an online platform to collect survey data presupposes that only respondents with access to the Internet could participate in the survey. In developing countries, there are indications that only those who live in suburban and urban centers currently have access to the Internet; only those respondents may have been captured in the study in those regions (Fakunmoju et al. 2015; Fakunmoju and Bammeke, 2017). Respondents who live in rural areas and lack access to the Internet may have been inadvertently excluded from participating in the survey, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings. Finally, demographic differences in endorsement of rape myths across countries, beside gender, could not be examined in the multivariate analysis due to group size differences and violation of requirements, which also limits the generalizability of findings.

### **Implications for policy, practice, and research**

The current findings highlight country and gender differences in rape-supportive beliefs and generate knowledge that may help to draw attention to vulnerable regions of the world. The fact that Nigeria was the most likely country to endorse rape myths presupposes that Nigeria will

benefit from effective measures for modifying beliefs about rape. Because beliefs are often precursors to behaviors (Fakunmoju et al., 2019), successful implementation of such measures may contribute to prevention of sexual victimization of women and reduce perpetration of sexually violent behaviors in the country. Similarly, because respondents in the United States were least likely to endorse rape myths, compared to respondents in other countries, it is possible that effective preventive and protective measures, policies, and programs in the United States may be transferrable to examined countries where women remain vulnerable to victimization of sexual violence and rape-supportive beliefs. Such international transfer might help to shift the focus from patriarchal to egalitarian views of women in those countries.

Similarly, the finding that men were more likely than women to endorse rape myths highlights the need for protective policies, awareness raising, education, and enlightenment programs and interventions to enhance the sensitivity that is needed for eradicating or minimizing rape-supportive beliefs. For example, in a sexual violence prevention intervention provided to university students in Ghana, it was determined that rape-supportive scores for male participants improved, indicating higher rejection of rape-supportive beliefs (Rominski et al., 2017a). This suggests that education and literacy programs that challenge the idea that female victims of rape asked for it, male perpetrators of rape did not intend to rape the victim, sexually violent behaviors did not constitute rape, and the female victim of rape lied about the experienced sexual violence may be critical in reducing rape-supportive beliefs and sexually violent behaviors against women. Similar measures directed at women in Nigeria might mitigate the psychological assimilation of oppressive values and beliefs that are instrumental to perceiving the female victim of rape as “asking for it” and exonerating the male perpetrator of rape as not “meaning to” perpetrate the rape. In general, the “targeting of rape myth acceptance

in primary prevention strategies” (Yapp & Quayle, 2018, p. 1) might be effective in reducing the propensity for sexual violence against women.

To generate better conclusions, future studies may utilize a mixed-methods approach in which qualitative responses about thoughts, feelings, and perceptions associated with rape myths could provide a better context to gain clearer understanding of rape myths across cultures in ways that transcend developmental, cultural, and religious explanations offered in the present study. Cognitive interviews to gain critical narratives and self-reports of victimization and perpetration of sexually violent behaviors could enhance the ability to determine the relevance of rape myths to sexually violent behaviors.

### **Conclusion**

Differences in exposure to varieties of patriarchal structures and ideologies presuppose differences in endorsement of rape myths. Respondents in developing countries (Ghana and Nigeria), where exposure to egalitarian values and principles is minimal, endorsed rape myths more than did respondents in developed (United States) or middle-developed (South Africa) countries. Respondents in South Africa were less likely than respondents in Ghana to endorse the myth that the female victim of rape “asked for it” and that the male perpetrator “didn’t mean to” rape the female victim. In contrast, female respondents in Nigeria were more likely than male respondents in Nigeria to endorse the myths that the female victim of rape “asked for it” and that the male perpetrator “didn’t mean to” rape the female victim. In general, men were more likely than women to endorse rape myths. However, it is critical to mention that women’s proclivity to endorse rape myths may be viewed as women merely expressing views that are consistent with their socialization experience, rather than as an affirmation and acceptance of their oppressive experience and conditions in patriarchal societies.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

Funding: This study was not funded by any entity.

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Ethical approval: All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.



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*Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

Sample characteristics	United States (USA) <i>n</i> = 148 (21.2)		South Africa (SA) <i>n</i> = 80 (11.4)		Ghana (GHA) <i>n</i> = 290 (41.5)		Nigeria (NG) <i>n</i> = 181 (25.9)		Total N = 699 (%)
	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	
<b>Age<sup>a</sup></b>									
Mean = years, 32.47, <i>SD</i> = 10-65									
<b>Marital Status</b>									
Single (never married)	70 (61.4)	20 (64.7)	23 (53.5)	17 (45.9)	73 (51.8)	80 (53.7)	64 (87.7)	60 (55.6)	409 (58.5)
Married, married but separated, divorced, and widowed	44 (38.6)	12 (35.3)	20 (46.5)	20 (54.1)	68 (48.2)	69 (46.3)	9 (12.3)	48 (44.4)	290 (41.5)
<b>Race</b>									
Non-White <sup>b</sup>	49 (43)	16 (47.1)	39 (90.7)	36 (97.3)	141 (100)	149 (100)	73 (100)	108 (100)	610 (87.3)
White/Caucasian (Non-Hispanic)	65 (57)	18 (52.9)	4 (9.3)	1 (2.7)	0	0	0	0	89 (12.7)
<b>Education background completed</b>									
Less than bachelor	1 (.09)	0	25 (58.1)	25 (67.6)	80 (5.7)	78 (52.3)	54 (74)	48 (44.4)	310 (44.3)
Bachelor	92 (80.7)	31 (91.2)	11 (25.6)	7 (18.9)	26 (18.4)	39 (26.2)	12 (16.4)	46 (42.6)	264 (37.8)
Master and above	21 (18.4)	3 (8.8)	7 (16.3)	5 (13.5)	35 (24.8)	32 (21.5)	7 (9.6)	14 (13)	125 (17.9)
<b>Student status</b>									
Student	18 (15.8)	6 (17.6)	9 (20.9)	2 (5.4)	56 (39.7)	65 (43.6)	44 (60.3)	25 (23.1)	225 (32.2)
Nonstudent	96 (84.2)	28 (82.4)	34 (79.1)	35 (94.6)	85 (60.3)	84 (56.4)	29 (39.7)	83 (76.9)	474 (67.8)

Female 371 (53.1), Male = 328 (46.9)

<sup>a</sup>USA (Mean = 36.04 years, *SD* = 11.03), SA (Mean = 36.34 years, *SD* = 8.55), GHA (Mean = 30.74 years, *SD* = 10.50), NG (Mean = 30.40 years, *SD* = 10.23).

<sup>b</sup>Black (African), African American (Non-Hispanic), Asian or Indian, Hispanic/Latino, Biracial/Multiracial/Colored (Bruinmense, Kleurlinge, or Bruin Afrikaners), and Other.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations on Rape Myth Acceptance for Countries

Variable <sup>a</sup>	United States		South Africa		Ghana		Nigeria	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
She asked for it	4.48	.69	3.78	.84	3.29	.99	2.64	.75
He didn't mean to	4.39	.68	3.85	.89	3.18	.89	2.83	.76
It wasn't really rape	4.77	.52	4.29	.76	4.02	.89	3.29	.73
She lied	4.24	.84	3.45	.87	3.38	.96	2.98	.78

<sup>a</sup>Cronbach's alpha:

United States = She asked for it (.85); He didn't mean to (.83); It wasn't really rape (.85); She lied (.91)

South Africa = She asked for it (.86); He didn't mean to (.84); It wasn't really rape (.88); She lied (.89)

Ghana = She asked for it (.84); He didn't mean to (.74); It wasn't really rape (.80); She lied (.78)

Nigeria = She asked for it (.75); He didn't mean to (.72); It wasn't really rape (.69); She lied (.76)

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations on Rape Myth Acceptance for Gender

Variable	United States		South Africa		Ghana		Nigeria		Total	
	M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
She asked for it	4.54 (.61)	4.27 (.88)	3.98 (.61)	3.54 (1.01)	3.36 (.98)	3.23 (1.00)	2.58 (.79)	2.68 (.72)	3.64 (1.07)	3.19 (1.02)
He didn't mean to	4.43 (.65)	4.26 (.74)	4.13 (.54)	3.52 (1.08)	3.25 (.99)	3.11 (.79)	2.75 (.72)	2.88 (.78)	3.61 (1.04)	3.2 (.91)
It wasn't really rape	4.81 (.44)	4.64 (.72)	4.57 (.43)	3.95 (.92)	4.09 (.89)	3.96 (.88)	3.29 (.77)	3.29 (.69)	4.21 (.88)	3.81 (.92)
She lied	4.29 (.77)	4.07 (1.01)	3.74 (.66)	3.12 (.96)	3.53 (.99)	3.24 (.89)	3.04 (.79)	2.93 (.77)	3.69 (.97)	3.21 (.93)

*Note.* Because Nigeria and Ghana is racially homogeneous (only Blacks/non-Caucasians) compared to the United States and South Africa that are racially diverse, race/ethnic variable was not examined in the model.