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Right-wing ideology fuels bias against sex trafficking victims: the mediating role of sexism

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ABSTRACT

The authors examined the relationship between right-wing beliefs and problematic attitudes towards victims of sex trafficking (ST). Study one used a cross-sectional survey ($N = 444$) to study the relationship between political orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, and beliefs about sex trafficking within US and UK populations. Results demonstrated that participants who were right-wing and participants from the US were more likely to report problematic attitudes towards victims of sex trafficking. Study two ($N = 126$) used a vignette-design to examine whether the relationship between right-wing beliefs and negative attitudes towards a ST victim was mediated by conservative biases such as just world beliefs and sexism. Findings indicated that hostile sexism, but not benevolent sexism or just world beliefs, mediated the relationship between right-wing beliefs and negative ST victim attitudes. Implications highlight the need for public organisations to ensure that members of the criminal justice system are educated around common ST misconceptions.

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Introduction

Sex trafficking (ST) is a public health emergency that continues to impact society globally (Anderson et al., 2019; Nemeth & Rizo, 2019; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017). It is estimated that 16 million people, mostly women and children (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017), are trafficked into commercial sex work each year (Ascencion, 2017; Williams, 2018). The effects of enslavement are cumulative and intergenerational, requiring a robust social and legal response to prevent victimisation and support survivors (Berishaj et al., 2019; Boyce et al., 2018; Mutter, 2018; Richmond, 2017; Smith, 2011). The efficacy of these responses is dependent on the attitudes and beliefs members of the general public hold about ST, such that greater awareness and empathy towards victims bring forward greater endorsement of crime prevention initiatives and better advocacy for the victims.

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In contrast, incorrect or limited understanding about the issue can prevent individuals from recognising ST victimisation. Long and Dowdell (2018) reported that over 90% of ST victims have been seen by health care professionals while enslaved, but most will not have been identified as victims at the time. Furthermore, research on other sexual crimes (e.g. rape) show that jurors' misconceptions about victims and their involvement in the offence can lead to the acquittal of perpetrators (Devine & Mojtahedi, 2021; Lilley et al., 2023; Parsons & Mojtahedi, 2022). Research has demonstrated that significant proportions of the general public have a limited or inaccurate understanding of what ST is (Ascencion, 2017; Birks & Gardner, 2019; Dando et al., 2018) but less is known about the factors that predict these problematic views. Research on other sexual offences (e.g. rape) suggests that a person's political beliefs can predict their perceptions of victims (Canto et al., 2021; Spaccatini et al., 2019). The current paper extends this work by examining the relationship between right-wing beliefs and attitudes towards victims of ST.

ST attitudes: a tripartite model

To comprehensively assess attitudes towards a crime, one must adopt a tripartite approach considering cognitive, behavioural, and affective responses (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Problematic cognitive attitudes reflect inaccurate beliefs about the crime, which can ultimately impede victim identification (Okech et al., 2012), promote victim-blaming, and reduce victim believability (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). Prominent examples of problematic cognitive beliefs about ST include mistaking ST with smuggling (Ascencion, 2017; Birks & Gardner, 2019; Buckley, 2009), failing to understand that individuals breaking other laws (e.g. substance abuse) may simultaneously be victims (Santana, 2018); and among Western populations, the erroneous beliefs that ST doesn't happen locally or that it only affects individuals from foreign countries (Pajnik, 2010; Todres, 2009). Such misconceptions are also espoused by those working in responsive roles. For example, a study on law enforcement personnel found that only 4% of respondents believed human trafficking was prevalent in their communities (Farrell, 2009). Many individuals also underestimate the difficulties ST victims face in escaping from their traffickers (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016), which resultantly leads to false beliefs that victims are complicit in the sex work (Herzog, 2008). Similar examples of victim-blaming have been observed in other gender-based crimes such as intimate partner violence where victims are sometimes blamed for their abuse due to not leaving their abusers (Policastro & Payne, 2013; Riley & Yamawaki, 2018). Further complications can arise if jurors hold such misconceptions, Stevens et al. (2023) found that pre-trial attitudes towards sex trafficking victims informed the decision-making of mock jurors.

Individuals holding negative cognitive attitudes towards ST may interact with victims and survivors of ST informally (e.g. family or friends) or formally (i.e. through their occupational role, such as police officers). Encountering blame and other negative feedback after victimisation is referred to as *secondary victimisation* (Ullman, 2010) and can have further adverse effects on the victim. Rajaram and Tidball's (2018) interviews with ST survivors suggest that many victims are hesitant to receive support due to similar negative experiences. More specifically, survivors from the study reported feeling as though they were not believed and somewhat complicit in their ordeals (e.g. prostituting) when interacting with investigators and medical professionals. Similar effects of secondary victimisation have been observed in other gender-based crimes (such as rape, Maier, 2008; and

intimate partner violence, Policastro & Payne, 2013), with victims who encounter negative responses being less likely to seek out further help and more likely to remain in their abusive environments (Policastro & Payne, 2013).

Negative behavioural attitudes, specifically views on combatting ST and supporting victims, can also be problematic as they can influence individuals' engagement with prevention and victim support interventions. Individuals differ in their sense of efficacy in combatting ST, with some holding a strong belief in their potential to make a difference while others feel that their actions would be futile (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Individuals may also hold problematic beliefs about how survivors of ST should be supported. While some individuals believe that survivors should be supported in a way that empowers them and gives them autonomy, others hold more paternalistic attitudes, believing that outsiders should intervene and make decisions for the survivors (Pajnik, 2010; Todres, 2009). Paternalistic attitudes towards supporting victims are prominently seen within gender-based crimes and are problematic due to reinforcing notions of victims being weak, dependent and incapable of functioning without supervision (Bloom, 2018).

Affective responses to ST mainly reflect the level of empathy and emotion individuals show towards victims. Though positive affective responses (e.g. greater empathy towards ST victims) promote greater advocacy for victims and policies aimed at combatting the crime (Clements et al., 2006; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016), they are not consistently held. Some individuals show considerably less concern towards victims of sexual violence, often due to perceiving them as being somewhat responsible for the offence (Clements et al., 2006; Sprankle et al., 2018).

Right-wing beliefs and ST attitudes

Research on public attitudes towards other gender and sexual victimisation crimes (e.g. rape and intimate partner violence) suggests that an individual's political orientation may dictate their attitudes towards ST. Political orientation plays an influential role in various behaviours and attitudes relating to social (e.g. prejudice, Duckitt & Sibley, 2007) and legal (e.g. Lambert & Raichle, 2000; Vogel & Vogel, 2003) issues. Niemi and Young (2016) found that though conservative (right-wing) participants were no more likely than liberal (left-wing) participants to explicitly blame victims of rape for the offence, they were more likely to suggest that such incidents could have been prevented if the victims had taken different actions. However, political psychologists argue that a unidimensional 'left-right' continuum does not adequately characterise the complex nature of political ideologies (e.g. Feldman & Johnston, 2014). The right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) concept proposed by Altemeyer (1988) delineates ideological differences on social constructs that may inform crime attitudes more precisely than one's placement on a political spectrum. RWA is aligned more closely with conservatism and reflects identities and values consistent with social conventionalism (Jost et al., 2009), submission to authority (Kreindler, 2005) and hostility towards individuals who violate traditional values (Altemeyer, 2004).

Empirical research has demonstrated a link between RWA and negative attitudes towards victims of gender-based crimes such as harassment (Spaccatini et al., 2019), rape (Canto et al., 2018; Manoussaki & Veitch, 2015), and intimate partner violence (Hockett et al., 2009; Valor-Segura et al., 2011). More specifically, individuals with high RWA are more likely to blame the victims (Canto et al., 2021; Spaccatini et al., 2019)

and less likely to support campaigns that advocate for victims of gender-based violence (Riley & Yamawaki, 2018). Furthermore, Niemi and Young (2016) found that participants self-identifying as politically conservative and those who scored high on RWA were more likely to perceive victims of sexual crimes as being tainted or contaminated. Such views are problematic as they demonstrate stigmatisation of victimisation and imply feelings of disgust towards victims.

The relationship between right-wing beliefs and victim attitudes can be attributed to multiple factors that are ingrained within right-wing ideology. Research shows that individuals with high RWA demonstrate greater levels of both hostile and benevolent sexism (Riley & Yamawaki, 2018; Sibley et al., 2007), which in turn have been associated with attitudes that normalise violence against women and place blame on the victims (Flood & Pease, 2009; Valor-Segura et al., 2011). Furthermore, in line with perceived 'conventional' values, right-wing authoritarians are more likely to endorse gender-stereotypes (Süssenhach & Böhner, 2011) and tend to respond with hostility towards women who defy traditional gender norms, such as the expectation for women to be sexually inhibited (Jost & Kay, 2005; Sibley et al., 2007). Resultantly, individuals with high RWA may respond negatively to victims of gender-based crimes if they believe that the victim was defying the traditional feminine gender role in the lead up to the offence (e.g. being promiscuous or dressing provocatively).

Right-wing beliefs are also associated with *just world* beliefs (JWB; Niemi & Young, 2016), a cognitive bias around the belief that the consequences that befall on people are morally fitting (e.g. 'bad things happen to bad people'; Furnham, 2003). This can be attributed to the conservative belief that individuals are responsible for their own circumstances. For instance, Pellegrini et al. (1997) found that conservative participants were more likely to attribute homelessness to internal factors that presented the homeless individuals as being more culpable for their circumstances whereas liberal/leftist participants showed greater consideration towards situational factors (e.g. system failures) that could have caused homelessness. In relation to victimisation, right-wing ideology places greater scrutiny towards the roles individuals play in their own victimisation (Anderson et al., 1997) and less concern towards the victims (Haslam, 2016), in comparison to more liberal ideologies. Thus, as a result of JWB and a greater tendency to attribute cause internally, right-wing individuals may more readily assume that a victim of ST will have placed themselves in a position to be exploited through their own transgressions.

The past decade has seen a gradual increase in research examining public attitudes and beliefs around ST, however, there is still limited knowledge on the dispositional factors that drive problematic beliefs. The current paper consists of two connected studies that examined the relationship between right-wing beliefs and attitudes towards victims of ST (study one), and the underlying factors that mediate this relationship (study 2).

Study one

Study one examined the relationship between right-wing beliefs and ST attitudes among US and UK participants. Based on previous research surrounding RWA and victim

attitudes, the authors hypothesised that right-wing beliefs (measured through RWA and political orientation) would predict negative attitudes towards victims.

Reports suggest that the US and UK are hotbeds for commercial sexual exploitation within the West (U.S. Department of State, 2022a, 2022b; Williams, 2018) and have been the target of recent anti-trafficking campaigns (e.g. STOP THE TRAFFIK) and legislations (e.g. Modern Slavery Act, 2015). However, despite the US being vastly more populated than the UK (331.9 million to 67.33 million), reports from Department of Justice for the U.S. suggest that the US secured fewer ST convictions (203) than the UK (332) in 2019 (U.S. Department of State, 2022a, 2022b) – suggesting that there may be some cultural or legislative differences in how ST is perceived and responded to. Though there is no pronounced theoretical rationale to suggest significant differences in ST attitudes between the two countries, potential differences in ST knowledge (which may be dictated by the amount of public education) between US and UK citizens could produce differences in attitudes. Therefore, the second aim of the study was to compare ST attitudes between US and UK participants. Due to a lack of comparative research, *a priori* hypotheses were made.

Materials and methods

Participants

Initially, 556 participants were recruited through an online crowdsourcing service (*Amazon Mturk*) and compensated \$0.50 for participation. Risks of ingenuine responses (i.e. haphazard responses provided to secure participation payment) were mitigated using three attention test questions (e.g. 'please select the 'strongly disagree' option for this question'), a common method for maintaining data reliability when using crowdsourcing platforms (e.g. Mojtahedi et al., 2021). Twenty-four responses were removed due to failing to respond to any of the key questions and a further 91 respondents were removed for failing at least one attention test (79.9% retention). Despite the partial reduction in data, post-hoc power analyses using *G*power* 3.1.9.2 (Faul et al., 2009) suggested that all subsequent regression models remained sufficiently powered (minimum $1-\beta = 911$).

The final sample consisted of 444 participants (male = 271, female = 168, non-binary = 5; *M* age = 36.6, *SD* = 18) from the UK (*n* = 156) and US (*n* = 288). There were no significant age ($p = .954$) or gender ($p = .647$) differences between the country groups.

Procedure and materials

Both studies received ethical approval from the lead author's institution (*School Research Ethics & Integrity Committee*). A cross-sectional design was used, where participants completed an online survey on *Qualtrics*. After providing informed written consent, participants were presented with demographic questions followed by the Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale and finally the Right-Wing Authoritarian questionnaire (explained below). The average completion time was 8.6 minutes (IQR = 9).

Participants were asked to report their age, gender, and country of residence. A seven-point likert-scale was used to measure political orientation as each point represents a meaningful category (i.e. 1 = extreme left, 2 = moderate left, 3 = slight left, 4 = central,

etc.). Participants were given alternative options of *independent*, *other* and *uncertain* to prevent inaccurate forced responses.

Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale (STAS; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016) measures six attitudinal constructs through 27-items that participants respond to using a six-point Likert-scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). The *Attitude Toward Ability to Leave* subscale (*Leave*; five items) reflects an understanding about the ST victims' difficulties in leaving their circumstances, with higher scores reflecting appreciation towards such difficulties and lower scores reflecting a belief that victims could easily leave their situation. The *Efficacy to Reduce Sex Trafficking* subscale (*Reduce*; five items) reflects the perceived sense of efficacy one has towards combatting ST and helping victims, with higher scores representing a greater belief in one's abilities to make a difference. The *Knowledge About Sex Trafficking* subscale (*Knowledge*; four items) measures understanding of the different forms of ST, with higher scores reflecting greater knowledge. The *Empathetic Reactions Toward Sex Trafficking* subscale (*Empathy*, five items) measures affective reactions to ST with higher scores reflecting greater empathy towards victims and negative emotional reactions to the crime. The *Attitudes Towards Helping Survivors* subscale (*Help*; three items) assesses respondents' views towards helping former victims of ST. Higher scores represent the belief that survivors should be allowed to make their own decisions whereas low scores embody paternalistic views (i.e. outsiders should make decisions for survivors). Finally, the *Awareness of Sex Trafficking* subscale (*Aware*; five items) measures respondents' level of awareness on the prevalence of ST as well as organisations that work against trafficking, with higher scores reflecting greater awareness.

The measurement has gradually been adopted within various studies (Herrero-Villoria et al., 2022; Litam & Lam, 2021) owing to its comprehensive range of subscales, of which all demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency within the present study ($\alpha > .6$, see Table 2).

Short Version Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) Scale (Zakrisson, 2005) was used to measure participants' endorsement of RWA views. Participants were required to respond to 15 statements (e.g. 'Our country needs a powerful leader in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today') using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly negative; 7 = Strongly Positive). A unidimensional score was constructed by averaging item responses, after reverse scoring seven of the items ($\alpha = .72$).

Data analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS® 26.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk NY, USA) for Windows®. For all regression models, preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of linearity, and homoscedasticity. The collinearity statistics (VIF & Tolerance) for all models indicated that multicollinearity was unlikely to be a problem (Tolerance $> .1$ & VIF > 10 for all predictors; see Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Gender was controlled for in the regression analyses due to a large body of evidence suggesting that men are more likely to hold victim blaming attitudes in gender-based or crimes (Alfredsson et al., 2016; Cunningham & Cromer, 2016; Nabors et al., 2006; Riley & Yamawaki, 2018).

Results

Preliminary analyses

The sample was politically diverse, such that 10.9% were extremely left, 23.6% were moderately left, 12.9% were slightly left, 10.2% were centrist, 7.3% were slightly right, 11.8% were moderately right, and 13.6% were extremely right. The remaining participants (9.9%) identified as either independent, other (e.g. Libertarian), unsure or did not disclose. Though the latter political orientations represent legitimate political beliefs, they were not included in subsequent analyses due to their low cell counts. Instead, political orientation was analysed as a continuous variable (extreme left to extreme right), as done so in past research (e.g. Chirumbolo, 2002; Roets et al., 2014). For similar reasons, only male & female groups were considered when analysing the effects of gender.

Descriptive data and correlation coefficients for all continuous variables are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Prior to exploring ST attitude predictors, gender and country of residence groups were compared on RWA and political orientation (PO) to determine whether there were any differences that could have a confounding effect on the association between country and ST attitudes. There were significant differences in political orientation [$t(352.65) = 4.41, p < .001$] and RWA [$t(437) = 1.43, p = .154$], such that UK participants were more left-leaning and reported lower RWA than US participants (see Table 1).

ST attitude differences

Six hierarchical linear regression models were tested to investigate the ability of country of residence, gender, political orientation and RWA in predicting ST attitudes (*Leave, Reduce, Knowledge, Empathy, Help, & Awareness*). Given the strong association between country, RWA and PO, a hierarchical approach was used. This would allow us to determine firstly, if country of residence could predict attitudes after controlling for RWA and secondly, if political orientation and RWA made unique contributions to the model.

Leave. At step 1, the model for *Leave* scores was statistically significant [$F(3, 394) = 81.32; p < .001$], with all predictor variables making a significant contribution. The addition of RWA at step 2 significantly improved the model (R^2 change = .017, $p < .001$). The final model explained 39.9% of variance [$F(4, 393) = 65.25; p < .001$], with all predictors making a significant contribution (see Table 3). UK ($\beta = .5, p < .001$) and female ($\beta = .1, p = .012$) participants were more understanding of the difficulties ST victims faced in leaving their circumstances compared to their counterparts. Conversely, being more conservative

Table 1. Mean (standard deviation) scores for country and gender groups.

	Gender		Country		Total (N = 444)
	Male (n = 168)	Female (n = 271)	US (n = 288)	UK (n = 156)	
Political Orientation	3.86 (2.06)	3.61 (2.02)	4.05 (2.2)	3.21 (1.57)	3.77 (2.05)
RWA	3.79 (.77)	3.67 (.86)	4.01 (.6)	3.24 (.9)	3.74 (.81)
Leave	3.31 (1.08)	3.55 (1.09)	2.93 (.95)	4.29 (.74)	3.41 (1.09)
Reduce	4.12 (.92)	4.17 (.9)	4.31 (.84)	3.83 (.95)	4.14 (.91)
Knowledge	4.56 (.88)	4.69 (.85)	4.4 (.82)	5.01 (.85)	4.62 (.88)
Empathy	4.18 (.86)	4.46 (.95)	3.97 (.78)	4.88 (.83)	4.29 (.91)
Help	3.11 (1.05)	2.98 (1.02)	2.79 (.87)	3.57 (1.12)	3.06 (1.04)
Awareness	4.07 (.71)	4.2 (.69)	4.14 (.61)	4.06 (.84)	4.11 (.7)

Table 2. Correlation coefficients and descriptives for continuous variables.

	Age	Leave	Reduce	Knowledge	Empathy	Help	Aware	RWA	Polit
Age	1								
STM-Leave	.043	1							
STM-Reduce	-.077	-.401***	1						
STM-Knowledge	.086	.143**	.26***	1					
STM-Empathy	.018	.547***	.042	.386***	1				
STM-Help	-.015	.4***	-.34***	-.188***	.098*	1			
STM-Awareness	.025	-.291***	.568***	.293***	.147**	-.295***	1		
RWA	.017	-.423***	.142**	-.293***	-.345***	-.333***	.062	1	
Political O	-.003	-.259***	-.004	-.093	-.216**	-.167***	.042	.335***	1
α	-	.725	.766	.766	.688	.744	.639	.761	-
Mean	35.88	3.36	4.19	4.63	4.28	3.05	4.33	3.72	3.73
SD	10.59	1.09	.91	.87	.91	1.04	.78	.83	2.06
Skew/Kurtosis	1.04/.76	.14/- .98	-.63/.41	-.85/1.76	.3/- .92	.54/.05	-.6/.34	-.86/1.27	.33/1.31
Range	18-72	1-6	1-6	1-6	2-4-6	1-6	1.75/6	1-6.6	1-7

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Hierarchical regression model for leave (N = 444).

Variables	R^2	B	SE	β	t
Step 1	.382				
Country (UK)		1.29	.11	.57***	14
Gender (female)		.24	.09	.11**	2.72
Politics		-.08	.02	-.14*	-3.53
Step 2	.399***				
Country (UK)		1.15	.1	.5***	11.42
Gender (female)		.22	.09	.1*	2.51
Politics		-.06	.02	-.1*	-2.5
RWA		-.2	.06	-.15**	-3.3

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

($\beta = -.1$, $p = .012$) and authoritarian ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .001$) was predictive of more dismissive attitudes towards ST victims' difficulties in leaving their circumstances.

Reduce. At step 1, the model for *Reduce* scores was statistically significant [$F(3, 394) = 9.47$; $p < .001$], with only country of residence making a significant contribution. The addition of RWA at step 2 did not make a significant improvement to the model (R^2 change = .002, $p = .325$), however, the overall model remained significant [$F(4, 393) = 7.34$; $p < .001$], explaining 7% of variance. Country of residence remained the only significant predictor (see Table 4), such that UK participants ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .001$) held weaker beliefs in their ability to combat ST compared to US participants.

Knowledge. At step 1, the model for *Knowledge* scores was statistically significant [$F(3, 394) = 17.47$; $p < .001$], with only country of residence making a significant contribution. The addition of RWA at step 2 did not significantly improve the model (R^2 change = .008, $p = .065$), however, the final model remained significant [$F(4, 393) = 14.07$; $p < .001$] and explained 12.5% of variance. Again, only country of residence made a significant contribution to the model (see Table 5), with UK participants ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) displaying greater knowledge about ST than US participants.

Empathy. At step 1, the model for *Empathy* scores was statistically significant [$F(3, 394) = 47.24$; $p < .001$], with all predictor variables making significant contributions. The addition of RWA at step 2 significantly improved the model (R^2 change = .01, $p = .018$). The final model explained 27.5% of variance [$F(4, 393) = 37.25$; $p < .001$]. Country of residence, gender and RWA made significant contributions to the model (see Table 6). UK ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) and female ($\beta = .14$, $p = .002$) participants were more empathetic towards ST victims compared to their counterparts; conversely, RWA ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$) was predictive of lower empathy towards ST victims.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression model for reduce (N = 444).

Variables	R^2	B	SE	β	t
Step 1	.067				
Country (UK)		-.5	.09	-.26***	-5.3
Gender (female)		.03	.09	.02	.36
Politics		-.02	.02	-.05	-1.09
Step 2	.07				
Country (UK)		-.46	.1	-.24***	-4.38
Gender (female)		.04	.09	.02	.43
Politics		-.03	.02	-.07	-1.32
RWA		.06	.06	.06	.99

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression model for knowledge (N = 444).

Variables	R^2	B	SE	β	t
Step 1	.117				
Country (UK)		.6	.09	.33***	6.83
Gender (female)		.14	.09	.08	1.62
Politics		-.01	.02	-.02	-.5
Step 2	.125				
Country (UK)		.53	.1	.29***	5.4
Gender (female)		.13	.09	.07	1.48
Politics		.001	.02	.002	.04
RWA		-.11	.06	-.1	-1.88

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 6. Hierarchical regression model for empathy (N = 444).

Variables	R^2	B	SE	β	t
Step 1	.265				
Country (UK)		.87	.08	.46***	10.39
Gender (female)		.27	.08	.14***	3.33
Politics		-.05	.02	-.12**	-2.67
Step 2	.275				
Country (UK)		.78	.09	.41***	8.44
Gender (female)		.26	.08	.14**	3.17
Politics		-.04	.02	-.09	-1.92
RWA		-.13	.06	-.12*	-2.37

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Help. At step 1, the model for *Help* scores was statistically significant [$F(3, 394) = 21.89$; $p < .001$], with country of residence and political orientation making significant contributions. The addition of RWA at step 2 significantly improved the model (R^2 change = .03 $p < .001$), with the final model explaining 17.3% of variance [$F(4, 393) = 20.55$; $p < .001$]. Country of residence and RWA made significant contributions to the model, such that participants from the UK ($\beta = .25$, $p < .001$) were less likely to endorse paternalistic approaches to helping ST victims compared to US participants, and RWA ($\beta = -.2$, $p < .001$) was predictive of greater endorsement of a paternalistic helping approach. Political orientation was no longer a significant predictor of Help scores after controlling for RWA (see Table 7).

Aware. At step 1, the model for *Aware* scores was statistically significant [$F(3, 394) = 4.83$; $p = .003$], with only country of residence making a significant contribution. The addition of RWA at step 2 did not significantly improve the model (R^2 change $< .001$, $p = .943$), however, the final model remained significant [$F(4, 393) = 3.74$; $p = .005$] and

Table 7. Hierarchical regression model for help (N = 444).

Variables	R^2	B	SE	β	t
Step 1	.143				
Country (UK)		.73	.1	.34***	7.08
Gender (female)		-.14	.1	-.07	-1.39
Politics		-.05	.02	-.11*	-2.22
Step 2	.173				
Country (UK)		.55	.11	.25***	4.9
Gender (female)		-.17	.1	-.08	-1.68
Politics		-.03	.03	-.06	-1.12
RWA		-.26	.07	-.2***	-3.78

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 8. Hierarchical regression model for aware (N = 444).

Variables	R^2	B	SE	β	t
Step 1	.035				
Country (UK)		-.26	.19	-.16**	-3.13
Gender (female)		.15	.08	.09	1.85
Politics		.01	.02	.02	.37
Step 2	.035				
Country (UK)		-.26	.09	-.16**	-2.82
Gender (female)		.15	.08	.09	1.84
Politics		.01	.02	.02	.37
RWA		-.04	.06	-.004	-.07

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

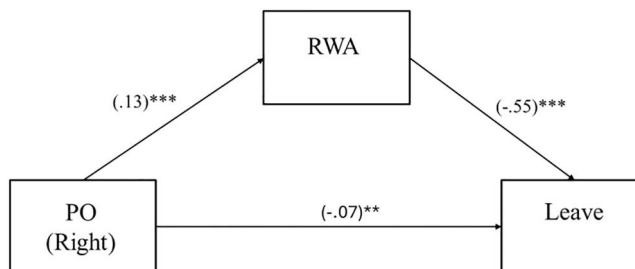
explained 3.5% of variance. Again, only country of residence made a significant contribution to the model (See Table 8), with UK participants ($\beta = -.2$, $p < .001$) reporting lower levels of (perceived) awareness about ST than their US counterparts.

RWA as a mediator

Political orientation significantly predicted the three ST attitudes that were concerned with the victim (*Reduce*, *Empathy*, and *Help*), however, the predictive effects decreased when RWA was controlled (becoming non-significant for *Empathy* and *Help*). Three mediation analyses with bootstrapping method (5000 re-samples) were performed using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012) to determine whether the relationships between political orientation and the associated ST attitudes (*Empathy*, *Help* and *Leave*) were mediated through RWA. Indirect effects (mediation) were only considered significant if the respective corrected 95% CI excluded zero.

Figure 1 illustrates the mediation model for *Leave*. Results indicated that Right-wing political orientation had a significant total effect ($B = -.14$, $p < .001$, 95% C.I.: $-.19$ to $-.09$) and significant direct effect ($B = -.07$, $p = .009$) on *Leave* scores. RWA was significantly associated with *Leave* scores ($B = -.55$, $p < .001$) and mediated 52.65% of the total effect between political orientation and *Leave* scores [indirect effect: $B = -.07$, 95% C.I.: $-.1$ to $-.05$].

Figure 2 illustrates the mediation model for *Empathy*. Results indicated that Right-wing political orientation had a significant total effect ($B = -.1$, $p < .001$, 95% C.I.: $-.14$ to $-.05$) and a significant direct effect ($B = -.05$, $p = .031$) on *Empathy* scores. RWA was significantly associated with *Empathy* scores ($B = -.37$, $p < .001$) and mediated 50.68% of the total

**Figure 1.** Mediation model for Political orientation and *Leave*.

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; PO = political orientation, RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

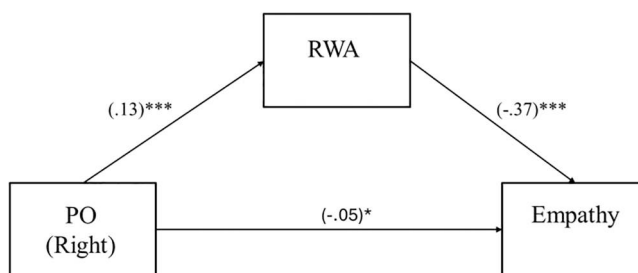


Figure 2. Mediation model for Political orientation and Empathy.

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; PO = political orientation, RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

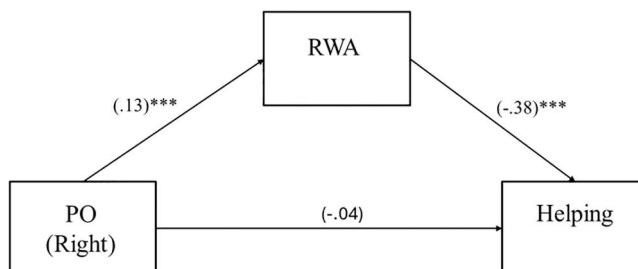


Figure 3. Mediation model for Political orientation and Helping.

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; PO = political orientation, RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

effect between political orientation and *Empathy* scores (indirect effect: $B = -.05$, 95% C.I.: $-.07$ to $-.03$).

Figure 3 illustrates the mediation model for *Help*. Results indicated that Right-wing political orientation had a significant total effect ($B = -.09$, $p < .001$, 95% C.I.: $-.14$ to $-.04$) on *Helping* scores, however, the direct effect was non-significant ($B = -.04$, $p = .143$). RWA was significantly associated with *Helping* scores ($B = -.38$, $p < .001$) and mediated 58% of the total effect between political orientation and *Helping* scores (indirect effect: $B = -.05$, 95% C.I.: $-.08$ to $-.06$).

Discussion

Participants of different political leaning displayed similar levels of knowledge and awareness about the ST and its prevention, however, right-wing participants held more negative attitudes towards ST victims (supporting our hypothesis). More specifically, right-wing participants were less empathetic towards victims of ST, less aware of their difficulties in leaving the trafficking environment, and held more paternalistic views on supporting survivors. The findings could be attributed to inherent biases that are prominent among right-wing individuals, such as sexism (Riley & Yamawaki, 2018) and JWB (Niemi & Young, 2016) – these theoretical explanations are tested in study two. The findings also indicated that the relationship between right-wing political orientation was partially mediated through RWA. From these observations, it is suggested that future research examining the influence of political beliefs measure specific constructs within political

Table 9. Correlation coefficients and descriptives for continuous variables (N = 124).

	Political O	RWA	JWB	Hostile sexism	Benevolent Sexism	Empathy	Blame	Helping
Political O	1							
RWA	.505***	1						
JWB	.243***	.185*	1					
Hostile sexism	.444***	.62***	.23**	1				
Benevolent sexism	.144	.413***	.321***	.419***	1			
Empathy	-.271**	-.349***	-.062	-.358***	-.187*	1		
Blame	.262**	.362***	.245**	.448***	.244**	-.588***	1	
Helping	-.236**	-.431***	.092	-.482***	-.209*	.152	-.211*	1
α	-. 857		.879	.889	.826	.926	.869	.924
Mean	4.05	3.72	21.66	2.39	2.8	57.76	12.6	4.24
SD	1.57	.88	6.1	.76	.65	8.8	7	1.22
Skew/Kurtosis	.05/-1.16	.12/.8	.09/-58	-.001/-72	-.4/-08	-.36	.84/.07	-.53/-37
Range	1-7	1.33-6.4	7-37	1-4.09	1-4	-.55	4-34	1-6

Notes: * $p < .05$,** $p < .01$,*** $p < .001$.

ideologies rather than reducing these beliefs down to an ordinal continuum. As such subsequent analyses within Study 2 used RWA as the core measure of right-wing beliefs.

Clear differences between UK and US participants were observed on all ST attitude dimensions. Despite having greater awareness of ST issues, US participants were less knowledgeable about ST and the difficulties victims face in leaving their abuse, compared to their UK counterparts. Taken together, these differences suggest that individuals from the US may encounter more information about ST but such information, or at least their understanding of the information, may not be entirely accurate. US participants were also less empathetic towards victims and in greater support of paternalistic approaches to helping survivors, which may have stemmed from their less accurate ST knowledge. There does not appear to be a conspicuous explanation for these cross-cultural differences, with a multitude of factors (e.g. media coverage, moral beliefs and educational resources) potentially playing a role in the attitudinal variance. Further academic inquiry is needed to understand the causal factors that underpin these differences, which will also be useful for developing efficient strategies to reduce negative victim attitudes within societies.

Though not central to the aims of the present study, the gender differences in ST attitudes observed within the present data deserve discussion. Male and female participants were similarly aware and knowledgeable about ST; they also held similar beliefs around reduction efficacy and helping approaches, yet despite this, male respondents were more dismissive about the difficulties victims faced in leaving their situations and expressed lower empathy. The latter observations align with past research demonstrating that men are more likely to place blame onto victims of gender-based crimes (Alfredsson et al., 2016; Nabors et al., 2006). These gender differences can be attributed to men being more likely to endorse traditional gender roles which have been associated with negative attitudes towards victims of gender-based violence (Koepke et al., 2014; Flood & Pease, 2009). Gender differences in victim empathy and understanding could also be a result of female participants identifying more closely with the ST victims (Olsen-Fulero & Fulero, 1997; Osman, 2011).

Study two

A second study was carried out to unearth theoretical explanations of the relationship between right-wing beliefs and ST victim attitudes. More specifically, the authors tested a hypothesis that sexism (hostile and benevolent) and JWB would partially mediate the relationship between right-wing beliefs and negative victim attitudes.

A shortcoming of study one's design was that it measured participants' general beliefs about ST rather than their reactions to actual cases. As a result, responses will have varied based on personal interpretations of ST and may not have accurately reflected how individuals would respond to real-world cases. Study two overcame this issue by using a vignette paradigm to examine how right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) influenced attitudes towards a realistic ST case. The authors hypothesised that RWA would again predict negative victim attitudes (victim blaming, paternalistic attitudes towards helping and low empathy).

Methodology

Sample

An a priori power analysis was conducted to determine the minimum sample requirement for regression testing. Due to the introduction of new predictors, an estimated effect size of $f^2 = .15$ was used based on a medium-sized relationship between RWA and ST attitudes observed in study 1. With a significance criterion of $\alpha = .05$ and power = .80, the minimum sample size needed with this effect size is $N = 80$.

An alternative online crowdsourcing service (*Prolific*) was used to reduce ingenuine response rates (via submission screening) and also to recruit a relatively balanced distribution of political orientations through the platforms inclusion criteria option (N political orientation: Far left = 2, left = 23, left-leaning = 22, centrist = 23, right-leaning = 18, right = 25, far right = 4, non-political = 7). One hundred and thirty participants from the UK were recruited and compensated the equivalent of \$2 for participation. Six responses were removed due to failing one of three attention checks, leaving a usable sample of 126 respondents (79 females) with a *Mean* age of 44.1 ($SD = 13.32$).

Procedure and materials

A similar procedure to study 1 was used, where participants completed a battery of questionnaires on Qualtrics. The short version RWA questionnaire (Zakrisson, 2005) was adopted again for study 2, with additional questionnaires measuring JWB and ambivalent sexism. ST attitudes were measured using a vignette with accompanying questions. All measures (described below) demonstrated strong internal reliability through acceptable Cronbach's Alpha values (see Table 9).

The Global Beliefs in a Just world Scale (GBJWS; Lipkus, 1991) consisted of seven items measuring JWB (e.g. 'I feel that people get what they are entitled to have'). Participants rated their agreement to each item using six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). The items were summed up to reflect a unidimensional JWB score, with higher scores reflecting greater JWB.

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 2018) was used to measure sexist beliefs. The 22-item scale measures two dimensions of sexism: Hostile sexism (11 items, e.g. 'Women seek power by getting control over men'), which reflects sexist attitudes that present women as being problematic, and benevolent sexism (11 items, e.g. 'Women should be cherished and protected by men'), which reflects stereotypical gender expectations that are perceived to be positive (i.e. protective paternalism, complimentary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy). Items are averaged to represent the respective constructs as well as a global average, though the present study only used the individual construct variables.

A sex trafficking vignette was developed based on a real UK case involving young female (pseudonym: Stephanie) who was sexually exploited for commercial gain by her partner for over a year until her escape. The scenario was then reviewed by an external professional involved in the protection of ST survivors in the Northwest region of England, who was asked to consult the authors on the ecological validity of the vignette. Following the consultation, the vignette was modified to clearly describe (i) the level of intimacy between the perpetrator and victim prior to and during the exploitation (ii) coerced substance use (iii) the victim's difficulties in leaving her partner (see Supplementary materials).

A battery of questions was then used to examine participants' attitudes towards the victim in respect to three constructs: Victim empathy, victim blaming, and attitudes towards helping the victim. Questions for each constructs were adapted from past research examining attitudes towards rape victims, with all three constructs demonstrating strong internal consistency (see Table 9).

Empathy towards the victim were measured using ten items (e.g. 'I feel sorry for Stephanie and her problems') adapted from Franklin and Garza (2021). Participants rated their agreement to each statement using a seven-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) which were summed to reflect total victim empathy, with higher scores reflecting greater empathy.

Victim blaming was measured using four items (e.g. 'To what extent is Stephanie to blame for what happened?') adapted from Brown and Testa (2008). Participants responded to the items using a nine-point scale (1 = not at all to 9 = to a great extent) which were summed to reflect total victim blaming, with higher scores reflecting greater victim blaming.

Attitudes towards helping the victim were measured using the three items from the STAS (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016; e.g. 'Even if Stephanie objects, an outsider should do whatever they think is best for Stephanie in the long run'.) which participants responded to using a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree). Item scores were reversed and averaged to create an average score, with lower scores reflecting the approval of paternalistic approaches to helping victims.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for all variables are presented in Table 9. Correlation coefficients reflect similar relationships as observed in study 1, such that right-wing political orientation and RWA were negatively associated with negative attitudes towards victims of sexual exploitation (i.e. lower empathy, greater victim blaming and paternalistic attitudes towards victims). Three multi-level mediation analyses were carried out using Hayes' (2012) Macro Process via bootstrapping method (5000 re-samples), to determine whether the selected mediators (JWB, benevolent sexism, and hostile sexism) had a mediational effect on the relationship between RWA and victim attitudes (*Empathy*, *Blame* and *Help*). Indirect effects (mediation) were only considered significant if the respective corrected 95% CI excluded zero. As illustrated in the figures below, RWA was significantly associated with all three mediator variables indicating that the variables were suitable for inclusion in the mediation analyses.

The mediation model for *Empathy* is illustrated in Figure 4. There was a significant total effect of RWA on *Empathy* ($B = -3.47, p < .001$, 95% C.I.: -5.14 to -1.8), but the direct effect of RWA on *Empathy* was non-significant ($B = -2.03, p = .066$). JWB was not significantly associated with *Empathy* ($B = .05, p = .697$) and did not mediate the relationship between RWA and *Empathy* (indirect effect: $B = .06$, 95% C.I.: $-.36$ to $.45$). Benevolent sexism was also not significantly associated with *Empathy* ($B = -.22, p = .87$) and did not mediate the relationship between RWA and *Empathy* (indirect effect: $\beta = -.07$, 95% C.I.: $-.09$ to $.08$). However, there was a significant negative relationship between hostile sexism and *Empathy* ($B = -2.68, p = .034$), and 41.37% of the total effect of RWA on *Empathy* operated indirectly through hostile sexism (indirect effect: $B = -1.44$, 95% C.I.: $-.31$ to $-.21$).

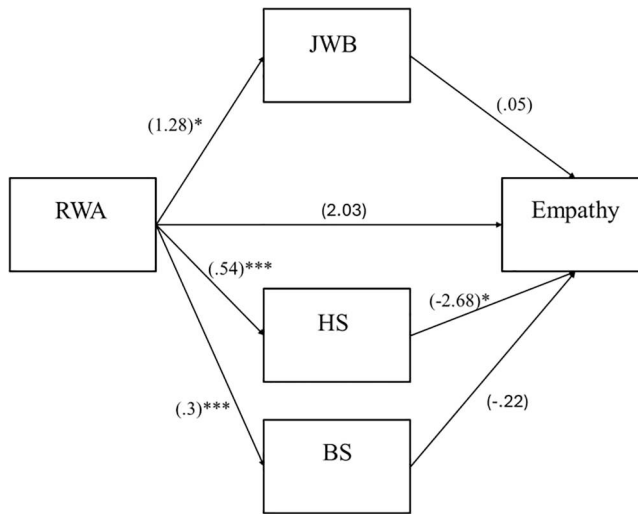


Figure 4. Mediation model for RWA and Empathy.

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; JWB = Just World Beliefs, HS = Hostile Sexism, BS = Benevolent Sexism, RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

As Figure 5 illustrates, a similar mediation model was observed for victim blaming (*Blame*). There was a significant total effect of RWA on victim blaming ($B = 2.87$, $p < .001$, 95% C.I. 1.54 to 4.19), but the direct effect of RWA on victim blaming was non-significant ($B = .99$, $p = .234$). JWB was not significantly associated with victim blaming ($B = .16$, $p = .098$) and did not mediate the relationship between RWA and victim blaming (indirect effect: $B = .21$, 95% C.I. $-.03$ to $.74$). Benevolent sexism was

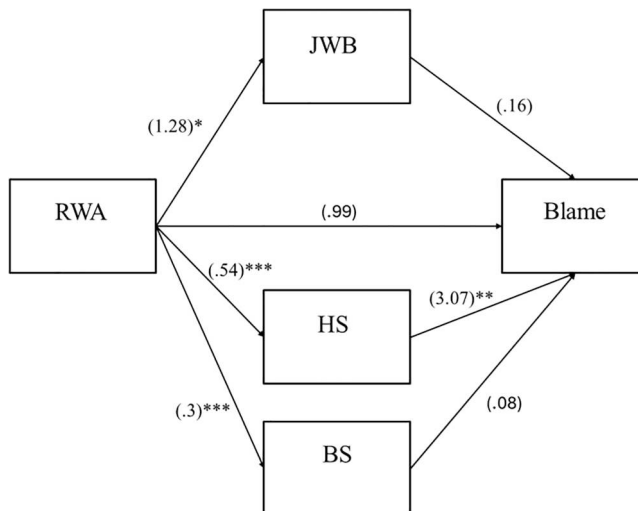


Figure 5. Mediation model for RWA and Blame.

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; JWB = Just World Beliefs, HS = Hostile Sexism, BS = Benevolent Sexism, RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

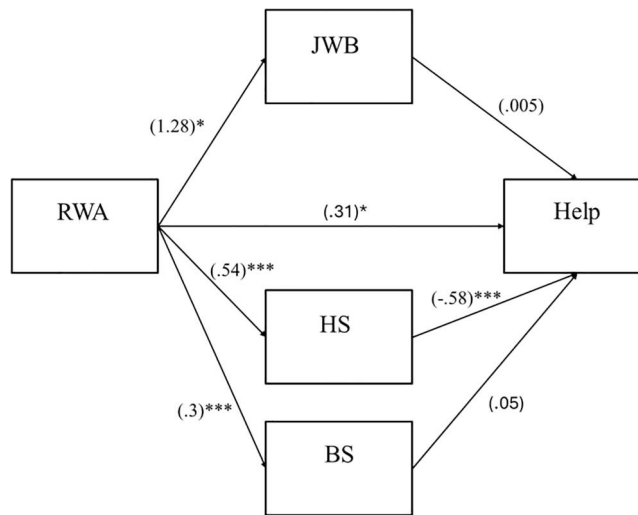


Figure 6. Mediation model for RWA and Empathy.

Notes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; JWB = Just World Beliefs, HS = Hostile Sexism, BS = Benevolent Sexism, RWA = Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

also not significantly associated with victim blaming ($B = .07$, $p = .94$) and did not mediate the relationship between RWA and victim blaming (indirect effect: $B = .02$, 95% C.I.: $-.73$ to $.63$). However, hostile sexism was significantly associated with victim blaming ($B = 3.07$, $p = .002$), and 57.2% of the total effect of RWA on victim blaming operated indirectly through hostile sexism (indirect effect: $B = 1.64$, 95% C.I.: $.51$ to 2.99).

As demonstrated in Figure 6, RWA had a significant total effect ($B = -.6$, $p < .001$, 95% C.I.: $-.82$ to $-.37$) and direct effect ($B = -.31$, $p = .032$) on helping attitudes (*Help*), such that individuals holding greater right-wing beliefs were more likely to endorse paternalistic approaches to supporting the victim. JWB was not significantly associated with helping attitudes ($B = .005$, $p = .781$) and did not mediate the relationship between RWA and helping attitudes (indirect effect: $B = .01$, 95% C.I.: $-.04$ to $.08$). Benevolent sexism was also not significantly associated with helping attitudes ($B = .05$, $p = .775$) and did not mediate the relationship between RWA and helping attitudes (indirect effect: $B = .02$, 95% C.I.: $-.1$ to $.12$). However, hostile sexism was significantly associated with helping attitudes ($B = -.58$, $p < .001$), and 51.79% of the total effect of RWA on helping attitudes operated indirectly through hostile sexism (indirect effect: $B = .31$, 95% C.I.: $-.49$ to $-.14$).

Discussion

The relationship between RWA and victim attitudes were replicated in the second study, with right-wing participants placing greater blame onto the victim, feeling less empathetic towards her and favouring paternalistic methods of supporting for her (supporting the second hypothesis). The combined findings support past research which have identified similar relationships between right-wing beliefs and victim blaming within cases of rape (e.g. Canto et al., 2021; Spaccatini et al., 2019). It cannot be overstated that the present findings do not assert that right-wing individuals are categorically negative

towards ST victims. The data indicated all groups were more supportive than hostile towards ST victims, however, participants holding negative attitudes towards ST were more likely to subscribe to right-wing beliefs.

A consistent mediational pattern was observed for all three measures of victim attitudes: Although hostile sexism, benevolent sexism and JWB were all associated with right-wing views, only hostile sexism had a mediational effect on negative victim attitudes, partially supporting the first hypothesis. Together the findings suggest that right-wing individuals' negative reactions to ST victims comes from biases to towards women rather than biases about general victimisation (i.e. 'people get what they deserve'). These findings align with previous research which demonstrated a similar link between sexism and victim blaming within domestic violence (Valor-Segura et al., 2011). The significant effect of hostile but not benevolent sexism on victim attitudes suggests that right-wing individuals may hold more negative views on victims as a result of perceiving women as collectively problematic. Though hostile sexism is not theoretically grounded within RWA, a core attribute of RWA is the hostile treatment of individuals who break social conventions, which can include expectations of women (Jost & Kay, 2005; Sibley et al., 2007). The victim from the ST vignette broke multiple conservative expectations (i.e. drinking from a young age, having sex with other men, abusing substances to cope with the exploitation) and as such, her actions may have served to reinforce right-wing participants' perceptions of women as problematic and engendered negative reactions towards her (e.g. reduced empathy and increased blame). Another explanation for the mediating role of hostile sexism is the *legitimisation hypothesis* (Lambert & Raichle, 2000) which stipulates that right-wing individuals' victim-blaming tendencies are motivated by a need to maintain traditional power differences between perceived dominant (male) and nondominant (female) groups. Lambert and Raichle (2000) corroborated the theory with data demonstrating that conservative participants were more likely to blame a female victim and more likely to excuse male perpetrators.

General discussion

Findings from the present studies highlight potential issues in the support and safeguarding of ST victims. For example, individuals within the criminal justice system (e.g. jurors, police, judges) endorsing right-wing views may be less inclined to believe victims of ST and more likely to be accusatory in their communication – something that is frequently experienced by survivors of ST (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018). Research on other forms of sexual violence highlights that victim blaming can carry further detriment with victims experiencing secondary traumatisation (Ullman, 2010) and being deterred from seeking out further support (Policastro & Payne, 2013). Reduced victim empathy from right-wing individuals is also problematic because the endorsement of victim advocacy and crime prevention campaigns are dependent on the public's affective response towards victims (Clements et al., 2006; Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Also, Riley and Yamawaki (2018) found that individuals with higher levels of RWA showed less intention to support victims of IPV. Together, the evidence suggests that right-wing ideology can serve to disrupt the support that is given to ST victims.

It is therefore imperative to educate members of the public to reduce inaccurate and problematic perceptions of ST. Hudspith et al.'s (2023) review of rape myth acceptance interventions highlights the efficacy of educational interventions in improving attitudes and behaviours towards victims of sexual abuse. Moving forward, further work is needed to create and evaluate the efficacy of ST education in reducing victim-blaming. Based on the recommendations of Hudspith and colleagues, successful interventions should be presented via video format and combine multiple components including the presentation (and dispelling) of ST misconceptions, content that promotes victim empathy and bystander programmes.

Addressing misconceptions about ST that promote victim blaming may also help facilitate greater victim empathy. Within the current studies, the strongest correlate of victim empathy was victim blaming (*Leave* subscale in study one), suggesting that individuals are less empathetic towards victims who are judged as making somewhat of an active choice to engage in the sexual exploitation. Within the context of ST, increased culpability towards the victims could imply beliefs that the victim was a sex worker, which could incur further hostile perceptions, especially from conservative individuals. Thus, educational interventions should prioritise addressing victim blaming myths. However, given that the relationships from the present studies were correlational, an alternative explanation for these observations could be that individuals who are more empathetic towards victims are more capable of understanding the difficulties victims face in preventing their exploitation.

Though the current paper provides corroborated insight into the relationship between right-wing beliefs and victim attitudes, the responses used in both studies came from paid crowd-sourcing platforms. A limitation of this sampling approach is that cohort may not be representative of the general population given the niche demographic of survey workers; thus, future studies should consider using a more randomised sampling technique that does not rest on monetary incentives.

Conclusion

Public perceptions of ST and attitudes towards victims have strong practical implications for the treatment of victims and endorsement of crime reduction strategies. The current study demonstrates that gender, culture and political beliefs can predict negative ST victim attitudes, which education could potentially reduce. Reducing ST misconceptions and fostering greater victim concern is imperative and dependant on further collaboration between academics and practitioners. Thus, directions for building on the current studies should focus on innovative ways to reduce negative perceptions, particularly through targeting pre-existing hostile sexist beliefs.

Open Scholarship



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Data availability statement

The data can be accessed using the following DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CBJK9>.

Disclosure statement

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

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