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Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women

A Resource Document

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The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Ontario.

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Executive Summary

This project flows from the Ontario government's *Sexual Violence Action Plan: Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives*. The goal was to create a resource document to support the development of introductory training on sexual violence, including supportive responses to victims/survivors who disclose experiences of sexual violence.

To prepare this resource, we primarily focused on peer reviewed published articles in the social science literature and publications from government agencies (e.g., Statistics Canada). Only publications in English were accessed. The review was thorough but not exhaustive.

Additional research would be required to provide in depth information on the specific and unique needs of diverse communities of women (e.g., Francophone women, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities). However, we have included examples relevant to some specific groups within the document.

Caveats to consider when reading this document include the limitations of the review and of the existing research. The evidence presented in this resource helps inform promising practices.

Section I: Understanding Sexual Violence

“Sexual violence is a broad term that describes any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality. This violence takes different forms including sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape, incest, childhood sexual abuse and rape during armed conflict. It also includes sexual harassment, stalking, indecent or sexualized exposure, degrading sexual imagery, voyeurism, cyber harassment, trafficking and sexual exploitation.”^{1, p.6}

Sexual Violence...

- is gender-based violence
- the vast majority of perpetrators are men
- the vast majority of victims/survivors are women
- uses power and control over a victim/survivor
- is not about love, lust, or unsatisfied sexual desire
- is rooted in gender inequalities and other systems of oppression
- is best understood within a human rights framework

Consent

While it is generally understood that individuals must obtain consent to sexual activity, widespread misconceptions confuse people's understanding of consent and sexual violence. Perpetrators may exploit confusion about consent or deliberately distort the meaning of consent in order to justify their behavior and to coerce victims/survivors. The *Criminal Code of Canada* defines consent as it relates to sexual assault as the voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity with another person.¹⁵ See the [Department of Justice](#) for details regarding the age of consent to sexual activity. Consent can never be obtained through threats or coercion.

Methods of Coercion

Methods of coercion used by perpetrators of sexual violence to exert power and aggression over victims/survivors include: intimidation and threats; assaultive behaviour or physical force; the use of alcohol or other substances; the use of power imbalances created by social status, position or role, physical size/strength/ability; persistent pressure to wear down the victim/survivor; and the exploitation of vulnerabilities.¹⁶

Section II: Rape Myths

Rape myths are stereotypical or false beliefs about sexual violence.⁵ These persistent and common misconceptions shape and influence how sexual violence is understood by those who have experienced it, by those who perpetrate it, by the families and friends of both victims/survivors and perpetrators, by those who respond to survivors and perpetrators in professional capacities, and by the public.

Widespread misunderstandings about sexual violence are rooted in, and contribute to, a social context in which all forms of sexual violence are perpetuated. Within this context, the seriousness of sexual violence is minimized, the meaning of consent is distorted, and victims/survivors are reluctant to report, blame themselves for what happened and worry that they will not be believed.

Rape Myths...

- exist despite advances through advocacy for victim/survivor rights, legal reform, public education, and a body of empirical evidence debunking myths about sexual violence³⁴
- are related to stereotypical gender constructs and systems of oppression^{34, 39}
- narrowly restrict perceptions of sexual violence and cause people to question or minimize the experiences of victims/survivors that fall outside of these misperceptions^{42, 43}
- exist at individual and institutional/societal levels⁵
- serve to blame the victim/survivor and contribute to the barriers they experience³⁶
- serve to excuse the perpetrator and contribute to the perpetuation of sexual violence^{48, 49}
- are often endorsed and reinforced through the media^{50, 52}

Frequently Studied Myths

MYTHS:	FACTS:
Women provoke sexual violence.	No behaviour or attire justifies sexual violence.
Sexual violence is perpetrated by strangers.	Victims/survivors of sexual violence most often know the perpetrator.
Sexual violence “cannot” occur in intimate relationships.	Sexual violence is perpetrated by intimate partners. Sexual assault of an intimate partner is an offense under the Criminal Code of Canada.
Women lie about being the victim of sexual violence.	Few allegations of this severely under-reported crime have a high probability of being false.

Section III: Consequences Experienced by Survivors

Sexual violence of all forms has consequences. The consequences experienced vary in nature, intensity and duration and can be affected by the victim/survivor’s experiences after the assault.

Psychological Health Effects

Research shows that survivors may experience significant psychological distress and concerns for their safety and well-being following sexual violence.^{2, 57, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71} These effects can include shame, fear, anxiety, anger, depression, traumatic stress reactions, and suicidal behaviours.

Physical Health Effects

Survivors of sexual assault may experience physical injuries (e.g., broken bones, genital-anal lacerations and bruises), reproductive health effects (e.g., sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy), and chronic health conditions related to stress and/or injury.^{57,76,78}

Research also shows that victims/survivors may not have any injuries (e.g., bruises, lacerations) or reproductive health effects as a result of sexual assault, and that similar physical effects can result from both consensual sexual intercourse and sexual assault.⁸¹ Thus, a lack of physical injuries or reproductive health effects is not evidence that a sexual assault did not occur.

Loss of Resources

Some losses experienced by victims/survivors include: losses to their mental and physical health as described above; loss of personal agency and control; loss of relations and community;⁸⁴ loss of work; and loss of economic resources.^{83,84}

Factors Influencing Consequences

Research has identified a range of factors that influence the meaning of sexual violence and its consequences for victims/survivors. Examples include: the characteristics of the sexual violence experienced (e.g., nature, intensity, frequency, duration);^{86, 87} a history of childhood sexual abuse or a significant traumatic experience;⁸⁹ and the responses of others following disclosure/reporting of the sexual violence (e.g., positive or negative).⁹² Within the context of a victim/survivor's social location, the above factors have implications for understanding the consequences experienced by the victim/survivor and for providing her support.

Section IV: Barriers to Disclosure and Resources

There are many reasons for, and potential benefits from, disclosing experiences of sexual violence (e.g., seeking assistance or emotional support, wanting to protect self and others from violence in the future, seeking justice by holding the perpetrator accountable).^{83, 93, 94}

Yet, very few victims/survivors disclose to formal supports such as the police, health care providers, and crisis workers.^{95, 96} For instance, Canadian victimization surveys show that less than 10% of victims/survivors who are sexually assaulted report the assault to the police.² Other forms of sexual violence are thought to be significantly under-reported or under-documented as well.

Research has identified numerous barriers that impede or prevent victims/survivors from reporting/disclosing and from accessing supports. All survivors are likely to experience one or more of these barriers. Survivors with disabilities and/or of differing race, class, and religious backgrounds, as well as LGBTT2SIQQ¹ survivors, have been shown to experience unique obstacles to disclosing and accessing services.

Barriers include:

- Shame, embarrassment, guilt and self-blame experienced by victims/survivors¹¹⁶
- The effects of rape myths and stereotyped beliefs^{9, 105}
- Fear of retaliation by the perpetrator or reprisals (e.g., in trouble for drinking underage when assault occurred)¹¹⁴
- Lack of awareness about sexual violence and available supports^{123, 130}
- Lack of resources or access to services, especially to culturally competent services^{123, 131}
- Distrust of formal supports¹²¹
- Concerns about confidentiality and privacy^{114, 121}
- Concerns about re-victimization by the system (e.g., criminal justice system)^{117, 118}

¹ LGBTT2SIQQ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Two-spirited, Intersex, Queer and Questioning

Section V: Safe and Supportive Responses to Disclosures

Some research has focused on creating a safe environment for disclosures and, in particular, the reactions that victims/survivors have found helpful in a variety of settings (e.g., mental health agencies, criminal justice settings, hospital emergency rooms, sexual assault hotlines, colleges/universities, and workplaces).^{83, 135, 139, 140, 142}

A review of this literature suggests the following responses are likely to be experienced as supportive and safe by the victim/survivor:

- Treat the victim/survivor with dignity and respect
- Engage in active listening
- Provide emotional support to the victim/survivor such as reassurance, belief, compassion and normalizing her experience
- Allow the victim/survivor to have control over her disclosure (e.g., what to disclose; how much to disclose)
- Be knowledgeable on what sexual violence is, its consequences for survivors, and what constitutes a supportive response
- Provide victims/survivors with information and links to resources
- Discuss confidentiality and any limitations
- Be culturally sensitive and aware of potential barriers to disclosure associated with difference

Introduction

Sexual violence is a serious, pervasive problem that can have devastating consequences in the lives of women and girls. There are many things we know about the impacts of this gender-based crime, including that it is almost exclusively perpetrated by men, and that specific populations such as young women, women with disabilities and Aboriginal women are particularly vulnerable.

In 2011, the Ontario government released its four-year *Sexual Violence Action Plan (SVAP): Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives*. The *Plan* focuses on raising public awareness to prevent sexual violence, improving services for victims and strengthening the criminal justice response.

Its vision is that, “Ontario is a place where all women live in safety, and are free from the threat, fear or experience of sexual violence.” Its principles state that:

- sexual violence is a gendered crime
- sexual violence is about power and control and is rooted in inequality between men and women
- all survivors deserve to be treated with dignity and respect
- an effective response requires collaboration between survivors, service providers and government
- programs, policies and services must be responsive to the needs of Ontario’s diverse communities
- perpetrators must be held accountable for their crimes
- everyone in Ontario shares the responsibility to stop sexual violence by promoting equality and respect

This document summarizes the research on sexual violence, primarily from the social science literature. The goal was to create a resource to support the development of introductory training on sexual violence, including supportive responses to victims/survivors who disclose experiences of sexual violence.

Additional research would be required to provide in depth information on the specific and unique needs of diverse communities of women such as Francophone women, Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, older women, and women from specific ethno-cultural communities.

However, we have included examples relevant to some specific groups within the document. It does not address childhood sexual abuse, forced marriages (i.e., as part of family cultural issues), or the sexual assault of men (some research is included on myths pertaining to male victims/survivors).

To prepare this resource, we focused primarily on peer reviewed published articles, publications from government agencies (e.g., Statistics Canada), as well as non-reviewed materials such as book chapters and conference presentations. Our review largely focused on the social science literature from 2000 to 2011, and wherever possible, on publications relevant to the Canadian context. Only publications in English were accessed. The review was thorough but not exhaustive.

The findings from our review are organized in the following five sections: Understanding Sexual Violence; Rape Myths; Consequences Experienced by Survivors; Barriers to Disclosure and Resources; Safe and Supportive Responses to Disclosures.

We suggest that the following caveats be considered when reading this document. No research is perfect. The level of scientific quality varies, as does its practical value. We have attempted to include the best of the current literature in this resource. The current research on sexual violence is largely explorative and qualitative in nature. Information on victimization and the existence or acceptance of myths is often derived from surveys (e.g., specific population samples or representative population samples). The topic of sexual violence does not lend itself to experimental designs (e.g., randomized assignment, control group) that allow us to generalize findings and to create evidence-based, best practices. The research in this review is best thought of as helping to inform promising practices.

A limitation of much of the quantitative research cited in this document is that it reports significant group differences, and these findings cannot be used to predict the response of an individual victim/survivor or the unique circumstances they face before, during and after an assault.

Also, relatively little recognition has been given to the role played by social support and societal and cultural factors in most of the studies reviewed. For instance, with respect to the consequences experienced by victims/survivors, the research has been more focused on victim/survivor's health symptoms, especially PTSD. The focus and nature of research is determined by many factors, including the backgrounds of the researchers (e.g., medicine, psychology), the complexity of designs required using an intersectional framework to study contextual factors, the constraints on research driven by graduate school research requirements, and a general failure to have diverse communities of women with lived experience of violence inform research initiatives. Regardless of the drivers of past research, future research is needed to further our understanding of how differences in

social location impact the experiences of victims/survivors of sexual violence.

Despite its limitations, we believe the research furthers our overall understanding of common experiences and challenges that many victims/survivors experience; contributes to our understanding of safe and supportive responses to disclosures; and assists us in the planning of future studies.

Scientific credibility is one standard by which we evaluate information. However, scientific credibility is not "truth." It is our hope that this document will be a meaningful resource for the advocates, practitioners, and educators who ensure the truths – the lived, diverse experiences of victims/survivors – are given voice.

I. Understanding Sexual Violence

What is Sexual Violence?

"Sexual violence is a broad term that describes any violence, physical or psychological, carried out through sexual means or by targeting sexuality. This violence takes different forms including sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape, incest, childhood sexual abuse, and rape during armed conflict. It also includes sexual harassment, stalking, indecent or sexualized exposure, degrading sexual imagery, voyeurism, cyber harassment, trafficking, and sexual exploitation."^{1, p.6}

This form of violence is about power and control, not sexual desire, and involves exerting dominance and aggression over someone else. It is gender-based violence. The vast majority of perpetrators are men, and while both men and women experience sexual violence, the vast majority of victims/survivors are women.²

The Roots of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is gender-specific and gender-based. The striking stability of gender patterns of violence demands a gender-centered explanatory framework. For example, the majority of sexual violence and severe intimate violence is perpetrated by males against females; the majority of nonsexual and severe, nondomestic violence is perpetrated by males against males.^{3, p.7&11}

Sexual violence is rooted in gender hierarchies, dominance, and power arrangements. These social arrangements privilege males and create gender inequality. Gender inequality exists at the macro level (bureaucracies, government, law, market religion), as well as the micro level (interactions, families, organizations, patterned behavior between intimates).^{4, p.557}

Patriarchal beliefs and systems vary across time, place and social contexts. For example, in the modern history of the Western world, women were not viewed as persons in the eyes of the law and were viewed as the property of men and a commodity for economic trade.⁵ Rape by a marriage partner, as recorded in eighteenth century common law and unchallenged for over 200 years, stated: "the husband cannot be guilty of rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract."^{6, p.331} Moreover, rape by a non-intimate partner was viewed as a crime against another man's property rather than a crime against a woman's body and integrity.⁷

Important advances have been achieved through advocacy for women's rights, legal reform, and education (e.g., women are citizens, can vote, can own property, can access education, have legal protection against rape within marriage). Yet, beliefs and systems favouring patriarchy persist and contribute to a social context that diminishes the desired impact of advances in gender equality and reinforces continued inequities. Within this context, systemic gains tend to benefit women at some social locations but not others, just

as patriarchal beliefs carve out havens of protection/dependency for some women but not for others (e.g., White women were given more protection from rape than were Black women).

To understand violence against women, we need to attend to all systems of oppression. The beliefs and systems contributing to gender inequality are sustained and reinforced by co-existing systems of oppression. Hunnicutt describes these systems as “interlocking structures of domination.”^{4, p.568} From this perspective, the roots of sexual violence are best described as gendered and racialized (colonialism, slavery) and are best understood within a human rights framework.

An intersectional analysis furthers our understanding and complements a human rights framework. Its major contribution is to reveal, recognize, and respond to multiple identities, multiple oppressions, and difference.^{8,9} Intersectionality is premised on the assumption that individuals have multiple layered identities (e.g., Black, lesbian, upper class) and that these social identities combine creating distinct and unique experiences. It takes account of how gender intersects with other social identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege.^{10, p.2} Integral to this analysis is the consideration of historical, social, and political contexts and the recognition of the distinct individual experience resulting from the combining of different types of identity.^{9, p.2}

Intersectionalities shape “the meaning and nature” of violence, “how it is experienced by self and responded to by others, how personal and social consequences are represented, and how and whether safety can be obtained.”^{11, p.276} They further our understanding of how interrelating systems of discrimination (e.g., racism, social class inequality, sexism, heterosexism) structure the relative positions or social locations of women and affect the causes and the consequences of sexual violence.

A helpful example is provided by the Association for Women’s Rights in Development:

“...many female domestic workers experience sexual assault and abuse at the hands of their employers. It is the intersection of the worker’s identities (e.g., female, poor, foreign citizen) that put her in the position of vulnerability. It is the intersection of the policies, programs and laws (e.g. employment policies, citizenship laws, shelters for abused women) that support and maintain the vulnerability. Because the policies do not respond to the specific identities of domestic workers, they do not allow the women to enjoy their right to be free from violence.”^{10, p.2}

Consider another example. Recently, a number of female police officers have publicly described their experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace and the failure of their employer to address their concerns.¹² The officers’ vulnerability and experiences were shaped by the intersection of their gender, their position in the organizational hierarchy relative to their alleged harassers, and the largely male-dominated culture of their workforce. Officers with identities that locate them outside of the dominant (or mainstream) society will both define and experience harassment differently than their counterparts who fit the dominant norms. For example, an officer may have been a single parent, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, a Lesbian, or Aboriginal. In fact, a single officer may have embodied more than one of these identities. Each officer’s gender identity would intersect with her other identities to influence her vulnerability, the meaning of sexual harassment to her, the barriers she experienced in reporting, and the consequences she experienced. As Carr and her colleagues stated, “intersectional analyses are needed to understand women’s harassment experiences and their ability to complain and seek legal resource.”¹³

While a useful tool for better understanding violence against women, we must remember that the purpose of an intersectional analysis is not to quantitatively assess the relative burden of victimization or privilege at specific social locations (i.e., intersections). We use intersectional analysis to “reveal meaningful distinctions and similarities in order to overcome discriminations and put the conditions in place for all people to fully enjoy their human rights.”^{10, p.2}

In an interview with CBC News, Marge Hudson, the first Aboriginal female RCMP officer in Manitoba, discussed her experiences with fellow officers:

“The RCMP’s commanding officer in Manitoba ... said he has only ever heard good things about Hudson, “The communities, quite frankly, loved her. They loved her approach, they liked the way she handled herself,” he said.

But it was what Hudson heard that tainted her early experience in the RCMP. “I could hear the male members talking about me, you know, like saying, ‘I would do her.’ ‘Why don’t you go ahead and do her?’” she said, tearing up while recalling it...

“Am I brown, is that the reason? Am I female, is that the reason? I had two shots against me right there – being Aboriginal, being female.”¹⁴

Consent

While it is generally understood that individuals must consent to sexual activity, widespread misconceptions confuse people’s understanding of consent and sexual violence. Perpetrators may exploit confusion about consent or deliberately distort the meaning of consent in order to coerce victims/survivors and to justify sexual violence. The *Criminal Code of Canada* defines consent as it relates to sexual assault as the voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity with another person.¹⁵ See the [Department of Justice](#) for details regarding the age of consent to sexual activity. Specifically, consent...

- can only be given by the individual;
- is active and ongoing;
- is a “yes” clearly obtained;
- is never assumed or implied;
- is not silence or the absence of “no”;
- ceases to be present if someone changes his/her mind;
- cannot be given if an individual is impaired by alcohol or drugs, or unconscious;
- can never be obtained through threats or coercion;
- cannot be obtained by abusing a position of trust, power or authority;
- cannot be generalized from one sexual activity or instance to other sexual activities or instances.

Methods of Coercion

Knowing the methods of coercion used to perpetrate sexual violence is critical to understanding this form of violence. Perpetrators of sexual violence exert pressure and force over victims/survivors. This can include intimidation and threats; assaultive behaviour or physical force; the use of alcohol or other substances; the use of power imbalances created by social status, position or role, physical size or strength or ability; persistent pressure to wear down the victim/survivor; and, the exploitation of vulnerabilities.

Coercion often occurs within an already established intimate relationship. Perpetrators purposefully select and use coercive tactics to commit sexual violence and to avoid negative consequences for their behaviour. Researchers have identified a number of coercive methods:

- **negative verbal persuasion** (e.g., threats to end the relationship; expressing dissatisfaction with the woman; swearing; withdrawing);
- **positive verbal persuasion** (e.g., compliments; making promises);
- **neutral tactics of persuasion** (e.g., continually requesting, nagging or leading for sex);
- **physical persuasion tactics** (e.g., kissing, sexual touching);
- **gaining access strategies** (e.g., isolating the woman; using false pretenses to be alone with the woman).¹⁶

A common myth is that a woman’s history of sexual relations with the perpetrator, or another, obligates her to have sex on subsequent occasions. Perpetrators may capitalize on the acceptance of this myth, using the victim’s prior intimacy to coerce her into having sex in the present. Research has indicated that perpetrators typically use more negative verbal persuasion when there is a sexual history between the man and women (e.g., threaten the victim, make the victim feel guilty).¹⁶

Some perpetrators use alcohol and/or other substances (prescription or nonprescription drugs) to intentionally incapacitate or sedate another person for the purpose of sexual assault. In the literature this tactic is referred to as “drug-facilitated” or “incapacitated” sexual assault or rape. Drug-facilitated rape has been shown to occur just as often as other forms of rape and is an especially common method of coercion by perpetrators in college/university settings.¹⁸ Misconceptions about sexual violence and the use of alcohol and/or substances tend to shift our blame to the victim/survivor and minimize perpetrator accountability.¹⁹ Perpetrators that use alcohol or other substances to exert control, overpower, or subdue a victim/survivor are also likely to use other coercion tactics simultaneously.²⁰

Perpetrators trafficking in persons also use coercion to move and sexually exploit victims/survivors. For instance, traffickers will find women that are experiencing violence and/or economic hardships and offer them escape through legitimate paying jobs in another country or in the case of domestic trafficking, another province or city.²¹ Victims/survivors may acquire debts from the traffickers for transportation to a destination. However, once the victim/survivor arrives, they soon realize that there are no legitimate jobs available and they are enslaved and sexually exploited.²²

Intra-national trafficking is often not addressed in research and statistics on trafficking in persons. According to the RCMP, “recent convictions (of) trafficking have mostly involved victims who are citizens and/or residents of Canada trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation.”²³ Similar coercion methods are used in international and intra-national trafficking of persons:

“Canadians facing economic deprivation and lack of opportunity for education or employment in their home communities are also pushed into exploitative industries, particularly the sex trade. Women from across Canada – many from poorer communities, a majority of them Aboriginal women and girls – leave their homes to enter the sex trade in urban areas. They may have been ‘lured’ by a person offering them a job, education, or other opportunities; they may have left of their own volition and been picked up at a bus depot by individuals seeking out such vulnerable new arrivals. Other scenarios involve moving to the city with a ‘boyfriend’ who convinces his partner to support them both through prostitution. No matter what the circumstances, it is clear that trafficking of Canadians within Canada exists, and that it is of particular significance to Aboriginal women and girls who move to urban areas to become involved in the sex trade.”²¹

Under Canada’s Criminal Code a trafficking offence includes any situation where a person is “moved or concealed and is forced to provide or offer to provide labour, a service, or an organ/tissue.” This movement can include interprovincial, inter-city, and even intra-city movement.

Bill C-49: Canada 2005 (see Appendix 2 in explanation of Section 279.04)

Statistics Related to Sexual Violence in Canada

The General Social Survey on Victimization (GSS), a national population-based survey, provides information on sexual victimization in Canada. While victimization surveys are a major and important source of information, it “cannot be assumed that all women will divulge such intimate and potentially stigmatizing experiences to a stranger in the context of an anonymous interview.”^{24, p.13} Further limitations, also should be kept in mind when considering the findings of the Canadian General Social Surveys presented below. For instance, the GSS only addresses the prevalence of sexual assault during the year prior to the survey and omits other forms of violence such as trafficking in persons, forced prostitution, and sexual harassment. Further, it excludes large numbers of immigrant individuals not proficient in either English or French, as well as individuals living with homelessness, in shelters or institutions, and without telephones or mobile phones only.²⁵ The reliability of the GSS results will be affected to the extent that those excluded from prevalence surveys differ from those who are not. The omission of forms of sexual victimization and the exclusion of those particularly vulnerable to violence, e.g., women who are incarcerated or living with homelessness, may underestimate the prevalence of sexual violence.

Another major source of information about sexual violence is police reported crime data. This data is derived from the aggregate Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR) and the incident-based Uniform Crime Reporting Survey (UCR2). These surveys provide a means for monitoring the prevalence and nature of sexual assault in Canada. However, quantifying sexual assault continues to be challenging since the large majority of sexual violence is not reported to the police.² Other limitations to consider include:

“Police may not record all incidents that are reported to them (even “founded” cases), and they may record a sexual assault as some other type of crime. Some cases reported to the police as sexual assault may result in a suspect being charged but with a different offence. The number of charges laid does not equate to the number of persons charged as more than one person can be charged in one incident and one person can be charged with many incidents.”^{24, p.13}

Key Findings

- More than one third of Canadian women report having had a least one experience of sexual assault since the age of 16.^{26, p.24}
- Less than 10% of sexual assaults are reported to the police. Male and female victims showed no significant difference in their likelihood of reporting sexual assaults.^{2, p.8 & 19}
- About 85% of sexual assault cases reported to the police are recorded as a crime. Estimates suggest less than half of these crimes result in a suspect being charged, and about 25% of those initially charged with sexual assault are convicted of sexual assault.^{23, p.14}
- 94% of police-reported adult sexual assault victims were female in 2008. 42% of these victims were women aged 18 through 24.^{27, p.24 & 16}
- The victim knew the accused in 82% of the police-reported sexual assaults in 2007.^{2, p.13}
- 97% of those accused in police-reported assaults were male in 2007.^{2, p.13}
- Charges are less likely to be laid and conviction rates are lower, for sexual offences than for other types of violent crime.^{2, p.10}
- About 20% of women experiencing spousal violence reported at least one incident of sexual assault.^{28, p.1}
- Aboriginal women experienced more than 3 times the rate of spousal violence reported by non-Aboriginal women, and significantly more severe and life-threatening violence, including sexual assault.^{29, p.5}
- About 600 women and children are trafficked into Canada each year for the purposes of sexual exploitation.^{30, p.2} Trafficking of Canadians within national borders is an often neglected issue when dealing with studies and statistics on trafficking in persons – particularly trafficking in the context of the sex trade.^{21, p.5}
- Women living with disabilities³¹ who experience intimate partner violence are more than twice as likely as other abused women to experience sexual violence in their relationships.³²
- In a 1993 national survey, 23% of Canadian women reported that they had encountered work-related sexual harassment in their lifetime.^{33, p.1}
- Victims turn to people they know for support -- friends (72%), family (41%), or co-workers (33%).^{2, p.14}

II. Rape Myths

Rape myths are stereotypical or false beliefs about sexual violence.⁵

These persistent and common misconceptions shape and influence how sexual violence is understood by those who experience it, those who perpetrate it, the families and friends of both victims/survivors and perpetrators, those who respond in professional capacities, and the broader public.

Myths about sexual violence are rooted in and contribute to a social context in which all forms of sexual violence are perpetuated. Within this context, the seriousness of sexual violence is minimized, the meaning of consent is distorted, and victims/survivors are reluctant to report, blame themselves for what happened and worry that they will not be believed.

Empirical studies on rape myths have focused largely on female victims/survivors and the acceptance of rape myths in college students.^{5, 34} An important minority of studies used other specific samples (e.g., police, clergy) or general population samples.^{36, 37}

This section will present the key findings on rape myths, the empirical evidence related to the existence of the myths most frequently studied, and the evidence dispelling them.

Key Findings

Rape myths exist despite advances through advocacy for victim/survivor rights, legal reform, public education, and a body of empirical evidence debunking myths about sexual violence.

A sizeable body of empirical research demonstrates the existence of rape myths.³⁴ Findings across studies suggest that between 25% and 35% of male and female respondents endorse the majority of classic rape myths.⁵

These findings may underestimate the acceptance of rape myths because the tools frequently used to study them are not designed to measure myths operating in implicit or nuanced ways.³⁸

Rape myth acceptance is associated with stereotypical gender constructs and oppressive beliefs.

Researchers at the University of Toronto conducted a meta-analysis on 37 North American studies (34 from US and 3 from Canada) on rape myth acceptance.³⁴ They found myth acceptance was associated with oppressive beliefs such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and religious intolerance.

Other researchers found that individuals who score high on measures of sex-based oppression (e.g., sexual prejudices, hostile sexism) and intergroup dominance (e.g., belief that social hierarchies should exist), were more likely to accept rape myths and to have a more negative attitude towards rape victims.³⁹

In another study, men who implicitly associated sex with aggression and dominance, and explicitly linked sex with power, were more likely to accept rape myths and had a tendency towards sexual violence.⁴⁰

Sheldon & Parent found that clergy who had sexist and religiously fundamentalist attitudes were more likely to have a negative attitude towards rape victims and to blame them for the assault.⁴¹

Rape myths narrowly restrict perceptions of sexual violence and cause people to disregard or minimize the experiences of victims/survivors that fall outside of these misperceptions.

Early understandings of sexual violence were limited to rape, and specifically, violent rape by disturbed strangers. From the 1970s to the present, advocates have reframed rape as an issue of power and control, placed emphasis on perpetrator accountability, stressed that the majority of sexual violence is perpetrated by acquaintances, and broadened our understanding of what constitutes sexual violence (e.g., sexually degrading language, pornography, and sexual harassment).³⁸

However, public perceptions of sexual violence significantly lag behind that of advocates and the empirical evidence.⁴² For instance, research shows that the public continues to have a narrow and stereotypical view of sexual violence,^{34,43} are less likely to recognize sexual harassment as sexual violence,⁴⁴ or to consider sexist and sexually degrading language about women as harmful and a form of sexual violence.⁴⁵

Restricted understandings of sexual violence are strengthened by, and associated with, our failure to identify the critical connection between sexual violence and broader societal level factors such as sexism and oppressive systems.^{38,42} This failure contributes to a culture of acceptance of sexual violence against women.

In a chapter on sexual violence and disabled women, Fran Odette writes:

“The myths that continue to deny disabled women access to our own identity and sexuality inform my ongoing community-based work with Springtide Resources. The prevalence of these myths contributes to the rape and sexual assault of disabled women. And while there is no lack of personal narratives and statistics about our rapes/sexual assault, there are no role models, research or mainstream media representations to “talk back” to such constructions and falsehoods.”⁴⁶

Rape myths exist at individual and institutional/societal levels.

Findings across studies indicate that about a quarter to a third of men and women endorse myths about sexual violence, with most studies reporting more endorsements by men than women.^{5, 34, 38}

Studies also indicate that professionals in roles of authority and decision making (e.g., police, clergy, and physicians) are influenced by rape myths.^{35, 41} For instance, Page attributed stereotypical attitudes and

misperceptions for her finding that police officers were less likely to believe a prostitute who claimed s/he had been raped and more likely to believe a woman who was a virgin or a professional woman.³⁵

Literature reviews are available that illustrate how rape myths have historical roots in and are present and perpetuated within societal institutions such as those of medicine, law, religion, and the military.^{5, 47}

Rape myths serve to blame the victim/survivor and contribute to the barriers they experience.

When we buy into myths and stereotypes, we shift the perpetrator's accountability for sexual violence onto the victim/survivor. The behaviours and appearance of victims/survivors are misperceived as sexual intent. Based on this misperception, we harshly judge and blame victims/survivors for being assaulted. For example, women are misperceived to be partially or completely responsible for a sexual assault if they did not say no clearly, if they behaved in a flirtatious manner, if they were intoxicated, if they wore seductive clothing, or if they had many sexual partners.^{5, 36} Consent means saying "yes" to sexual activity; however, myths distort the meaning of consent to being about saying "no." In addition, these myths contribute to the vulnerability of victims/survivors, the social stigma they experience, and the barriers they experience related to reporting and accessing supportive and safe responses (see Section IV for a fuller discussion on barriers).

Rape myths serve to excuse the perpetrator and contribute to the perpetuation of sexual violence.

Rape myths are viewed to contribute to the perpetuation of sexual violence by shifting the blame for sexual violence to the victims/survivors; minimizing the seriousness of sexual violence; denying or disregarding sexual violence; creating barriers to reporting and supports; justifying sexual violence; and exonerating perpetrators or minimizing their accountability.^{5, 38, 47}

Abbey and her colleagues studied risks associated with sexual violence in a community sample of single men (N=470). They found misperceptions of a woman's intent (e.g., woman's friendliness misperceived to mean she is asking for sex) and other factors (e.g., hostile masculinity, impersonal sex, alcohol consumption), were all significantly related to the number of sexually aggressive acts committed.⁴⁸

Loh and her colleagues conducted one of the few prospective studies on sexual perpetration with a large sample size (N= 325 male college students) and a longer follow-up period (7 months). They demonstrated a link between rape supportive attitudes/beliefs and subsequent sexual assault perpetration. They also found fraternity affiliation significantly predicted sexual perpetration and was associated with greater adherence to traditional ideas about gender roles.⁴⁹

Rape myths and facts about sexual violence are endorsed and reinforced through the media.

Myths about sexual violence are present in the media. For instance, six myths were identified in news articles dealing with sexual assault in six English-Canadian newspapers: 1) sexual assault is not about violence but about a man's inability to control his lust; 2) innocent men are often accused of sexual assault and women often lie about it; 3) the perpetrator is most likely a member of a minority culture; 4) an over-representation of the female perpetrator and male victim; 5) men with good reputations cannot be guilty of sexual assault; and 6) the victim provoked the assault.⁵⁰

Myths pertaining to male victims/survivors were found in 50% of rape coverage in U.K. newspapers between 1989 and 2002, including male rape is consensual sex, male rape is an exclusively homosexual issue, and alleged male rape victims/survivors are liars.⁵¹

Misconceptions about sexual violence in the media can influence the attitudes and beliefs of its consumers. For instance, Franiuk and her colleagues examined news headlines about a high profile sexual assault case (professional basketball player accused of raping a female acquaintance). They found that men exposed to headlines endorsing rape myths were less likely to think that the accused was guilty when compared to men exposed to non-myth headlines. Furthermore, the men exposed to myth-endorsing headlines were more likely to have attitudes supporting rape than were men exposed to non-myth headlines. When women and men were exposed to myth-endorsing headlines, men were more likely than women to have attitudes supporting rape.⁵²

Often, stereotyped portrayals of rape are found in advertisements, movies, and television shows. Correlations have been found between the acceptance of rape myths related to female victims/survivors and television usage,⁵³ as well as the type of programs viewed.⁵⁴ Specifically, viewing soap operas was related to the

overestimation of false rape accusations whereas, viewing crime shows was related to less rape myth acceptance. With respect to male victims/survivors, crime dramas have been credited with providing the few serious portrayals of male rape in the mass media.⁴⁷

Rape Myths and Male Victims/Survivors

While the findings reviewed in the previous section are viewed to apply to all rape myths, there has been little research on rape myths and male victims/survivors.⁵ Myths specifically pertaining to male victims/survivors include, but are not limited to, the following: men cannot be raped; men are not affected by rape (or not as much as women); and male rape is a homosexual issue. Early research indicates a strong positive correlation between endorsement of rape myths pertaining to female and male victims/survivors. This suggests that individuals who endorse rape myths about female victims/survivors also endorse myths about male victims/survivors and vice versa. The reader is referred to Turchik and Edwards for a discussion on this emerging area of research.⁴⁷

Frequently Studied Myths

Consistent with the purpose of this paper, this section will draw from the evidence that contributes to our understanding of myths about sexual violence. In large part, this research has focused on female victims/survivors and the following classic rape myths: women provoke sexual violence; sexual violence is perpetrated by strangers; sexual assault cannot occur within intimate relationships (e.g., husbands cannot sexually assault their wives); and women lie about sexual violence. These basic myths take on a variety of representations at different social locations as they are shaped by, and add to, the impact of other discriminatory attitudes and belief systems.

Myth: Women provoke sexual violence.

Fact: No behaviour or attire justifies sexual violence.

Many justifications for sexual violence involve different statements of victim blaming that fall under the common myth that women ask to be victimized. For example, people often misperceive sexual intent based on a victim/survivor's behaviours (e.g., drinking alcohol; having "several" sexual partners) or appearance (e.g., wearing revealing clothing), and then, harshly judge and blame the victim/survivor for being sexually assaulted.⁵

For instance, in a representative sample of Australian adults, over 40% agreed or were unsure that rape results from men not being able to control their need for sex.³⁷ Almost one-quarter agreed or were unsure that women often say "no" when they mean "yes".

In a representative sample of adults in the United Kingdom, Amnesty International found that substantial proportions of respondents felt a woman was either partially or completely responsible for a sexual assault if she failed to say "no" clearly (37% agreed), if she behaved in a flirtatious manner (34%), if she was intoxicated (30% agreed), if she was wearing seductive clothing (26% agreed), or if she had many sexual partners (22% agreed).³⁶ In contrast to intoxicated victims, some evidence suggests inebriated perpetrators are judged less harshly than sober perpetrators.¹⁹

A Canadian survey of adult men living in Alberta found that 40% of men said women who dress "provocatively" risk being raped and 14% agreed that women often say "no" when they mean "yes."⁵⁵

These misperceptions shift the accountability for sexual violence away from the person who perpetrated it and falsely blame the victim/survivor.

An example of blaming a victim and perpetuating a common myth:

On January 24, 2011, a safety forum was held at York University. A police officer in attendance, told the audience that "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized."⁵⁶

Myths: Sexual violence is perpetrated by strangers.

Sexual violence “cannot” occur in intimate relationships (e.g., a husband cannot sexually assault his wife).

Facts: Victims/survivors of sexual violence most often know the perpetrator.

Sexual violence is perpetrated by intimate partners.

Sexual assault of an intimate partner is an offense under the Criminal Code in Canada.

The evidence tells us that the majority of sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim knows. For instance, in cases reported to police in Canada during 2007, 82% of sexual assault victims/survivors knew their perpetrators.² Victim surveys also show that the majority of sexual assaults are committed by someone the victim/survivor knew. A recent, nationally representative survey in the US revealed that less than 14% of female victims/survivors and less than 16% of male victims/survivors were raped by a stranger.⁵⁷

Evidence also shows that the known person is often an intimate partner. Almost one in 10 US women have been raped by an intimate partner and 16.9% of women have experienced sexual violence other than rape by an intimate partner.⁵⁷

The risk for sexual violence by an intimate partner increases for battered women. Research in the US suggests that the lifetime prevalence rate for rape by an intimate partner rises 40 to 50% among battered women.⁶ The 1999 Canadian General Social Survey revealed that 20% of the women reporting some type of spousal violence reported experiencing at least one incident of sexual assault.^{28, p.6}

Despite the preponderance of evidence demonstrating that sexual violence is most often perpetrated by someone known to the victim/survivor, the stereotypical view of sexual assault as something perpetrated by strangers in dark alleys lives on. For example, one US study found that 31% of men and 19 % of women polled in a national telephone survey believed that a husband having sex without his wife’s consent does not constitute rape.⁵⁸ Other research findings revealed that belief in the possibility of rape by an intimate partner is often not accompanied by the knowledge that rape within a marriage is harmful to victims/survivors.⁵⁹

The *Criminal Code of Canada* was amended in 1983 to make it clear that the spouse of a victim/survivor could be charged with sexual assault.⁶⁰ The prevalence of myths almost 30 years later speaks to the seeming intransience of these myths and the oppressive and resistive structures (e.g., colonialism, sexism, racism) with which they are entwined and rooted.^{34,38}

Myth: Women lie about being the victim of sexual violence.

Fact: Sexual assault is one of the most under-reported crimes.

The number of false reports for sexual assault is consistent with the number of false reports for other crimes.

A wide range of stereotypes and false beliefs severely and inaccurately restrict perceptions about what constitutes sexual violence, about victims/survivors -- including who can be a victim, and about perpetrators. Holding these beliefs presupposes that any victim/survivor whose presentation and experience of sexual violence falls outside of these explicit and subtle misperceptions is likely to be disregarded or viewed as lying. It is often claimed, albeit without empirical support, that a large proportion of rape allegations are made up for purposes of revenge or other motives.^{5, 61, 62, 63} The prevalence of this misconception is illustrated by the findings of a representative survey of Australian adults: one-third of respondents were fairly certain or suspected that women falsely “cry rape.”³⁷

It is not surprising that so few victims bring a complaint forward when society believes or suspects that women lie about sexual assault. Canadian data show that less than 10% of victims/survivors who are sexually assaulted report the assault to the police.² Reasons that victims/survivors of sexual assault do not report include humiliation, feeling or anticipating being blamed, and perceiving it to be a personal matter or not important enough to report.^{2,64}

² This statistic relates to reported cases where the relationship between the victim and the accused was known. In 19% of all cases the relationship was not known.^{2, p.13}

Stereotyped beliefs about victims influence justice sector responses. For example, a study for the British Home Office found 25% of sexual assaults were “no-crimed” (i.e., “unfounded” or not recorded as a crime).⁶⁵ Across the police departments that participated in the study, 14% to 41% of sexual assault reports were not recorded as a crime. Reasons given for recording a sexual assault as “no-crimed” included the belief on the part of the officer that the complaint was false or malicious, the victim was unwilling to testify, or there was insufficient evidence. These reasons were in violation of the direction to use “no-criming” only when the complainant retracts completely or admits to fabrication. A further analysis revealed reasons behind the classification of false allegations which included mental health problems, previous allegation of sexual assault, and alcohol and drug use. The researchers concluded that only 3% of the “no-crimed” cases had a high probability of being falsely reported.

Other researchers also report that only a small percentage of false allegations are associated with the under-reported crime of sexual assault. Lisak and his colleagues coded 136 sexual assault cases reported to a major university in the US, during a 10 year period, and 5.9% were coded as false.⁶³ In Australia, Heenan and Murray conducted research as part of a government initiative on reported rapes in Victoria from 2000 to 2003. They found that 2.1% of reports were designated by police as false. The empirical data challenges persistent beliefs about women lying about rape, and in particular, about false allegations of reported rape.⁶²

Complainants that come forward and go to trial are often degraded during cross-examination. The defense attorney may reinforce myths to attempt to portray the victim/survivor as making a false allegation by stating that the sexual encounter was actually consensual or by making the victim appear as delusional, vengeful, exploitive, or an attention-seeker.⁶⁶ Myths and stereotyped beliefs set the stage for mistaking a recantation or a withdrawal from criminal proceedings as a false claim of sexual assault. Withdrawal and recantation happen for many reasons including victim-blaming and feeling unsafe.⁶⁶

The pertinent issue is, how do we debunk myths (e.g., women lie about sexual assault) to effect attitudinal and behaviour changes that protect the rights of victims/survivors?:

“It is clear that while law reform can eliminate the formal expression of rape myths, on its own it cannot alter the harmful attitudes and behaviour that continue to influence the reactions of women, perpetrators and bystanders, police screening practices, court processes, jurors’ decisions, conviction rates, and sentencing practices.... Until a commitment is made to address the prejudices in the response to sexual violence, women’s experiences will continue to be trivialized, male-centered definitions of women’s sexuality will be reinforced, violent men will not be held accountable, and women’s rights to sexual integrity, equality and justice will continue to be denied.”^{24, p.17}

Using data from Statistics Canada, Holly Johnson found that few sexual assaults lead to convictions:

“If attrition is calculated from the estimated 460,000 sexual assaults that occurred in one year and follow through to the 1,406 offenders who were convicted in criminal court, the result is that 0.3% of perpetrators of sexual assault were held accountable and 99.7% were not.”^{24, p.14}

III. Consequences Experienced by Survivors

Sexual violence of all forms has consequences. The consequences experienced vary in nature, intensity and duration and can be affected by the victim/survivor's experiences after the assault.

This section will present the evidence informing our understanding of the impacts of sexual violence on victims/survivors. For the purposes of this discussion, the consequences will be grouped into psychological health effects, physical health effects, and loss of resources. The discussion will conclude with an overview of the factors that can influence the victim's experience after sexual violence.

The current literature urges practitioners and future researchers to attend to and focus on understanding sexual violence, its consequences, and supportive responses within the context of intersecting social identities.^{9, 11} The existing research however, offers limited quantitative and qualitative data to further our understanding from an intersectional framework.

Psychological Health Effects

Psychological impacts of sexual violence can include shame, fear, anxiety, depression, traumatic stress reactions, and suicidal behaviours.

Research shows that survivors experience significant psychological distress and concerns for their safety and well-being as a result of cyber-sexual harassment,⁶⁷ sexual harassment in the workplace,⁶⁸ sexual assault,^{2, 57, 69} stalking,⁷⁰ and trafficking for sexual exploitation.⁷¹

Campbell and her colleagues reviewed 22 studies examining the impact of sexual assault on women's mental health. They found that 73 to 82% of survivors experienced fear and/or anxiety, 17 to 65% experienced PTSD, 13 to 15% experienced depression, 23 to 44% experienced suicidal ideation, and 2 to 19% attempted suicide (Note: while 22 articles were reviewed, not every article reviewed addressed the same set of psychological effects).⁶⁹

Studies have found the consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace to include emotional exhaustion and burnout,⁷² depression and anxiety,^{73, 74} and post-traumatic stress symptoms.^{68, 75}

Survivors of trafficking situations involving sexual exploitation also may experience high levels of anxiety, depression and PTSD.⁷¹

Physical Health Effects

Sexual violence has been associated with a number of short term and long term health effects such as physical injuries, reproductive health effects, and chronic health conditions related to stress and/or injury.⁵⁷

For example, the psychological stress associated with workplace sexual harassment has been shown to negatively impact physical health,⁷³ including loss of appetite, weight gain or loss, headaches, and sleep disturbances such as insomnia and fatigue.⁷²

Survivors of sexual assault and trafficking for sexual exploitation may experience physical injuries and reproductive health effects,^{76, 77} including head injuries, broken bones, internal organ damage, genital-anal injuries, dysmenorrhea (severe pain during menstruation that limits women's activities), menorrhagia (excessive or prolonged menstrual bleeding), urinary tract infections, pelvic inflammatory disease perhaps leading to infertility, and sexual dysfunction.^{76, 78, 79, 80} Other reproductive health effects include sexually transmitted infections (e.g., gonorrhea, herpes, human papillomavirus), including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and unwanted pregnancy.^{76, 77, 78}

Rape-induced pregnancies have been estimated to occur in 5% of female victims/survivors of reproductive age⁷⁹ and in 20% of victims/survivors raped by an intimate partner.⁸⁰

As well, the strategies used by victims/survivors to navigate through the consequences of sexual violence may negatively impact their health (e.g., smoking, alcohol or substance abuse).^{69, 76}

Research also shows that victims/survivors may not have any physical injuries (e.g., lacerations, bruises) or reproductive health effects as a result of sexual assault and that similar physical signs can result from both consensual sexual intercourse and sexual assault.⁸¹ A lack of physical injuries or reproductive health effects cannot be interpreted as evidence that a sexual assault did not occur.

Loss of resources

Just as there is overlap and connections between psychological and physical health effects, both of these consequences are intricately weaved with loss of resources for victims/survivors. Losses can be tangible or intangible, direct or indirect, and vary in intensity and duration.

Victims/survivors may experience losses to their mental and physical health as described above, loss of personal agency and control, loss of relations and community, and loss of economic resources. For example, in enslaving victims/survivors for commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking imposes a social isolation from all that was familiar and the burden experienced by victims/survivors includes loss of their independence, family, friends, faith community, home community, language, and culture.

Sexual harassment in the workplace can result in job dissatisfaction and career and/or economic disadvantage,^{75, 82} as well as estrangement from work peers and family when they do not understand harassment and blame the victim/survivor for it.⁸³ Absenteeism, lateness and avoiding work and work tasks can all be related to sexual harassment. Victims/survivors may escape sexual harassment by voluntarily leaving their job, or they may experience negative consequences such as unwanted transfers, termination, denied promotions, and poorer performance appraisals. All of the above consequences can directly or indirectly compromise careers and lead to financial losses.

Sexual assault victims/survivors also may experience consequences related to loss of health, work interruptions and job loss, income loss, and relationship loss. Monnier and colleagues found that 37% of victims/survivors in their study lost their job after the sexual assault and 21% had a relationship end.⁸⁴ It was also found that higher levels of distress symptoms following sexual assault were related to greater resource losses for victim/survivors.

Finally, victims of sexual violence experience a loss of their basic right to safety and freedom.⁸⁵

Factors Influencing Consequences

Research has identified a range of factors that influence the meaning of sexual violence and its consequences for victims/survivors. Examples include:

- the characteristics of the sexual violence experienced (e.g., nature, intensity, frequency, duration);^{86, 87}
- the relationship of the victim/survivor to the perpetrator (e.g., intimate partner, supervisor in workplace, stranger);^{72, 88}
- history of childhood sexual abuse or significant traumatic experiences;⁸⁹
- how victims/survivors process the sexual violence they experienced (e.g., attribution style, perceptions of control);⁹⁰
- the social support experienced by the victim/survivor (e.g., nature of, quantity);⁹¹ and
- the responses of others following disclosure/reporting of the sexual violence (e.g., positive or negative).⁹²

Within the context of a victim/survivor's social location, the above factors have implications for understanding the consequences experienced by the victim/survivor and for providing support to her.

IV. Barriers to Disclosure and Resources

There are many reasons for and potential benefits from disclosing experiences of sexual violence. Motivations and benefits include: seeking assistance or emotional support, reducing the burden of sexual violence by sharing; wanting to protect self and others from violence in the future; raising awareness about sexual violence in the community; or seeking justice by holding the perpetrator accountable.^{83, 93, 94}

Yet, very few victims/survivors disclose to formal supports such as the police, health care providers, and crisis workers.^{95, 96} For instance, Canadian data show that less than 10% of victims/survivors who are sexually assaulted report the assault to the police.² Other forms of sexual violence are thought to be significantly under-reported or documented as well.

This section discusses the barriers that impede or prevent victims/survivors from reporting/disclosing and from accessing supports. All survivors are likely to experience one or more of the barriers identified by research. Survivors with disabilities and/or of differing race, class, and religious backgrounds, as well as LGBTTSIQQ survivors, have been shown to experience unique obstacles to disclosing and accessing services.

Rape Myths and Stereotypes

The prevalence of rape myths and stereotyped beliefs that blame victims/survivors may cause or contribute to feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, and unworthiness. Feeling blameworthy and anticipating negative responses can isolate and silence victims/survivors.

For example, victims/survivors that experienced assaults consistent with stereotypical perceptions of a sexual assault (e.g., perpetrator being a stranger, the perpetrator using a weapon, and the victim being physically injured) were more likely to disclose to both formal and informal support sources compared to victims/survivors who experienced non-stereotypical assaults.^{96, 97} Additional findings indicate that victims/survivors of stereotypical assaults are more likely to disclose to formal supports because the assault had characteristics that made it more “believable.”⁹⁸ Fewer disclosures to police occur when factors are present that have been erroneously used to shift responsibility for sexual violence to the victim (e.g., alcohol and drug use by the victim).^{98,99} In the case of male victims/survivors, believability has been linked to the severity of the sexual violence.¹⁰⁰

While stereotypes and myths affect all victims/survivors, some social identities may experience increased or unique barriers to disclosure and services. For instance, LGBTTSIQQ survivors may be less likely to disclose sexual assault because of experiences of discrimination and hate, as well as myths discounting them as “real victims.”^{9, 47, 101} Heterosexism also creates barriers for male victims/survivors fearful of being labeled homosexual if they disclose or report sexual assault by another male.^{100, 102}

Intersections at other social locations create barriers rooted in racism, sexism, and social hierarchies. For instance, sexual and other forms of violence in the lives of Aboriginal women are compounded by systemic and institutionalized racism as well as the effects of historical violence, such as residential schools, the *Indian Act*, and other legacies of colonization. The resulting impacts have included the breakdown of family and community structures, intergenerational trauma, lack of opportunity for education and employment, and economic deprivation.¹⁰³ These realities have created vulnerabilities that are exploited by perpetrators and have “pushed women into exploitive industries, particularly in the sex trade.”^{21, p.5}

There are a disproportionately high number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada: over the past 30 years, 582 Aboriginal women and girls have gone missing or have been found murdered in communities across Canada; and 153 Aboriginal women and girls were murdered between 2000 and 2008.¹⁰⁴ Both Amnesty International and the United Nation’s Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women have called upon Canada to protect the human rights of Aboriginal women, to examine the cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women, and to remedy the system deficiencies related to failed investigations.¹⁰⁵

A qualitative study with adult sexual assault victims examined the experiences of Aboriginal women with the criminal justice system in Canada.¹⁰⁶ Their results suggest that race is an important determinant of experiences in the justice system. The women perceived the police to be indifferent or unresponsive to Aboriginal victims of sexual assault, sometimes leaving them vulnerable and unsafe. The findings are strongly echoed in evidence from over 150 witnesses from across Canada received by the Standing Committee on the Status of Women.¹⁰⁵ The murder of so many women by Robert Pickton in British Columbia illustrates the horrific consequences of a failed response into the disappearance of women, many of whom were Aboriginal.¹⁰⁵

The Sisters in Spirit Initiative, a Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) research and education project, has recorded:

- The disappearance or death of more than 582 Aboriginal women and girls across Canada;
- The murder of 153 of these women and girls between 2000 and 2008.¹⁰⁴

“Then President of NWAC Beverley Jacobs told a University of Western Ontario class in 2008 that if the same percentage of non-Aboriginal women were missing or murdered, the number would be a staggering 18,000.”^{105, p.14}

Slavery rendering African Americans the “property” of Caucasians, and myths about the sexuality of African American women, condoned sexual violence against African American women and false convictions of African American men for sexual violence against Caucasian women. All of these factors create barriers to reporting by African American victims/survivors.^{38, 107, 108} Racism, xenophobia, and discriminatory practices affect the willingness of immigrant/refugee and undocumented victims/survivors to seek assistance from outside agencies and can contribute to cultural freezing and community denial of sexual violence.¹⁰⁹

Another example of how stereotypes and myths associated with certain social locations create barriers pertains to victims/survivors living with disabilities. A qualitative Australian study revealed that police endorsement of myths about women living with intellectual disabilities created barriers and resulted in the women being treated differently from other victims/survivors of sexual violence (e.g., women with intellectual disabilities are not credible or reliable witnesses; women with intellectual disabilities are sexually promiscuous).¹¹⁰ Similarly, myths about victims/survivors living with physical disabilities create barriers that can result in their disclosures/reports being disregarded or treated less seriously (e.g., the myth that women with physical disabilities are asexual).^{111, 112}

The Globe and Mail, February 13, 2012, A12.

“SEXUAL ASSAULT MENTALLY CHALLENGED ADULTS

The ground she stands on

Is it fair to convict a man of sexual assault based in part on the word of a disabled woman with the mental age of a three- to six-year-old, who can't explain the difference between truth and lies?

That was the tough question before the Supreme Court of Canada last week. To answer “no” might deprive mentally challenged adults of a voice in court, leaving them virtually unprotected by the law.

The court answered well. Sticking to the text of a 1987 law, which allows mentally disabled adults to testify on a promise to tell the truth, as long as they can communicate evidence, the majority in the 6-3 ruling said it was wrong to ask the Ontario woman to explain what truth means.

...Not all testimony is equal; a judge decides how much weight to give it. But to cut off the possibility of testimony from disabled adults because they have trouble verbalizing what they understand of truth and lies is an arbitrary approach. It doesn't get at what they know, just at what they can explain about what they know.

That 1987 law permitting disabled adults to testify on a promise to tell the truth came after various scandals and studies revealed startling levels of victimization of disabled people. Truth is the only safe ground to stand on, someone once said, and mentally disabled adults should not be arbitrarily denied a piece of that ground.”¹¹³

Concerns about Confidentiality and Privacy

Breaching confidentiality or violating privacy can be concerns for victims/survivors of sexual violence. Often victims/survivors do not disclose sexual violence because they do not want anyone to know¹¹⁴ and they may feel that their confidentiality may be breached by informal or formal sources.¹¹⁵

For example, victims may have privacy concerns if formal supports insist on contacting other support services.⁹⁷ Visibility and confidentiality concerns can be prominent barriers among sexual violence victims/survivors living in rural communities or ethno-specific communities. Often they worry that once a formal support is contacted everyone in the community will know.¹¹⁶ Some may worry that private personal information such as sexual orientation will be revealed if they report sexual violence.¹⁰¹

Re-victimization by the System

Victims/survivors of sexual violence have difficulty disclosing to formal supports for fear that they will have to tell and retell the experience multiple times and to multiple people. Retelling is essentially reliving the experience for victims/survivors, which can cause them to feel re-traumatized and re-victimized.

Furthermore, some formal supports may use accusatory tones when responding to disclosures or appear threatening to victims/survivors especially when attempting to get an accurate description of the assault for prosecution purposes.¹¹⁶ Some victims/survivors find the reactions of authorities as rude, insensitive, condescending, or minimizing of the assault. These perceptions were echoed by sexual assault nurses, who felt that police contribute to distress through failure to ask questions in a sensitive manner, failure to proceed with investigations, and by asking victim-blaming questions.¹¹⁸ The nurses viewed the legal system as re-victimizing victims/survivors when charges are not filed, cases are delayed or dropped, plea bargains are unsatisfactory, and victims/survivors' character and credibility are questioned. Re-victimization by the medical system was perceived to result from long waits for service.

Negative past experiences with formal supports can prevent victims/survivors from utilizing these supports in the future. Victims/survivors working with an advocate have been shown to have more positive experiences with formal supports.¹¹⁹

Distrust of Formal Supports

Distrust in formal supports can be a barrier for victims/survivors of sexual violence. This can take the form of a lack of confidence that formal support sources will provide positive and effective responses to disclosures, or concern that reactions will be harmful.⁹⁷

For instance, Santovec found some university students did not have confidence in the ability of the campus police, or the university in general, to handle sexual assault cases or effectively discipline the perpetrator.¹¹⁵ Another study with university students who experienced cyber harassment, found that only 7% reported the harassment to a formal support and less than half of these students felt the situation was resolved to their satisfaction.¹²⁰

Saturday Star, January 28, 2012, A1&14.

“Abuse of power: 2000 federal workers fired, suspended for everything from incompetence to rape.

J. McLean & D. Bruser.

A psychologist who was also a senior manager in a federal facility “was fired after he pleaded guilty to threatening conduct toward a woman with whom he had an affair. She was a volunteer (at the facility), supervised by the (man), when the relationship began.

The initial six-count indictment included allegations of uttering death threats, unlawful confinement, intimidation on a highway, criminal harassment by watching and besetting and sexual assault.

As his job was to modify behaviour, ‘to get inmates to change and become better people’, (X) was fired for discrediting the prison system and because employees in his position are supposed to serve as law-abiding role models for inmates.

A judge gave (X) a suspended sentence and 18 months probation. (X) appealed his firing.

The labour relations tribunal, which concluded (X’s) crime was not serious and that there was no evidence that brought disrepute to the prison system, said his firing was too harsh a penalty. It reinstated X without loss of pay or benefits and ordered any reference to his firing stricken from the record...

The Federal Court of Appeal ruled the decision to give (X) his job back was flawed, in part because the adjudicator was wrong to characterize (X’s) crime as not serious.”¹²¹

Past mishandling of sexual violence cases, such as sexual harassment in the workplace, can impact the level of trust victims/survivors have in the reporting process and create future barriers to disclosure.¹²² Many victims/survivors of sexual assault believe that, even if they disclose the assault to the criminal justice system, the perpetrator will not be adequately penalized, especially if the perpetrator is a prominent figure in the community or knows someone in the court system.¹¹⁶ Victims/survivors of trafficking situations are often afraid to report because of their beliefs that police are corrupt or colluding with the perpetrators.¹²³

Fear and distrust of authorities, institutions, and governing systems, are intensified at social locations where oppressive systems intersect (e.g., colonialism, slavery, institutionalized oppression of LGBTT2SIQQ individuals, religious persecution). Generational effects and current experiences of individual and systemic discrimination serve as barriers for many survivors of sexual violence, including Aboriginal women,^{124, 125} African-American women,^{126, 127} immigrant/refugee and undocumented women,^{109, 128} lesbian and bisexual women¹⁰¹ and transgendered survivors,⁹ and women living with homelessness¹²⁹ or in rental housing.¹²⁴

Fear of Retaliation or Reprisal

Victims/survivors of sexual violence may not disclose to formal supports for fear of retaliation or reprisal.^{99, 114} In a study examining college students’ perspectives on sexual assault, both men and women felt that a fear of retaliation by the perpetrator would be a barrier to disclosure for female victims/survivors.¹⁰² These perceptions were supported by findings showing that over 8% of college women who experienced sexual assault stated that they would not disclose to police because they were afraid of the perpetrator.¹¹⁴ Victims/survivors of sexual assault within an intimate relationship are often afraid of retaliation from the perpetrator due to the ongoing access the perpetrator has to the victim,¹¹⁶ including fears related to stalking post separation. Fear of retaliation is especially prevalent among victims/survivors of sex trafficking. Often, perpetrators use violence and threats to engender fear and coerce compliance.^{77, 123} Given the low prosecution and conviction rates for sexual assault crimes,²⁴ victims/survivors may not view reporting to police as a means of increasing personal safety and security.

Fear of reprisal occurs for many reasons and is another barrier to disclosure. Some victims/survivors choose not to report the assault to police because they do not want to get the perpetrator in trouble (e.g., concern of reinforcing racial stereotypes; concerns of subjecting the perpetrator to institutionalized racism or homophobia; concern of deportation).¹¹⁴ Others may fear reprisal from authorities because they were drinking underage when the sexual assault occurred.⁹⁷ If an opportunity presents itself, victims/survivors

of trafficking and sexual exploitation may not disclose for fear of being deported, losing their children, or being prosecuted for criminal activity, such as prostitution.¹²³

Lack of Awareness about Sexual Violence and Social Supports

Many victims/survivors of sexual violence are not aware of the formal supports in their community. One study found that victims/survivors from both rural and urban communities felt that many women would not be aware of the services provided for them and that discussions of sexual assault did not occur in their communities. Furthermore, victims/survivors may have misperceptions about support services and question when they can access services (e.g., feeling that too much time has passed since the assault to utilize trauma centres).¹¹⁶

For instance, male victims/survivors of sexual assault are often not aware of formal supports available to them and are less likely to use those supports.¹³⁰ Victims/survivors of cyber sexual harassment may not know if what they have experienced constitutes sexual violence, and what authority, if any, to report the harassment to.¹²⁰ Due to certain barriers, victims/survivors of trafficking situations often do not know about services available to help them (e.g., forced isolation; cultural-linguistic barriers), or they may not be aware that they are victims of a crime.¹²³

A lack of understanding about sexual violence also may contribute to victims/survivors reluctance to disclose or even identify that their experience was an assault.¹²⁶

Lack of Resources/Access and Culturally Competent Services

Limited resources and accessibility to services create barriers for victims/survivors of sexual violence.¹²³ These barriers may be greater for victims/survivors living in rural or remote areas due to isolation, lack of public transportation, and long travel distances. Victims/survivors living with disabilities also face increased challenges due to limited options for transportation and settings that are not fully accessible (failure to provide attendant services, tele-type phone, ramps, etc.).¹³¹

The lack of culturally competent resources is cited frequently as a barrier experienced by victims/survivors of sexual violence.^{9, 126, 127, 132, 133} This barrier can prevent victims/survivors from contacting services, prevent continued contact, or diminish benefit from the service.

The impediments experienced by survivors when services are not culturally competent include biases on the part of providers; non-inclusive language; cultural and linguistic barriers; denial of the diversity within specific communities (e.g., LGBTTSIQQ community; ethno-specific communities and cultural communities); and discomfort or lack of sensitivity on the part of the service provider. Barriers also occur when service providers lack knowledge about the historical and current oppression that a survivor has lived with and do not attend to the meaning it may have for the survivor's experience of sexual violence.

Gentlewarrior states that “culturally competent work is guided by a commitment to looking at the intersection of all of the clients’ (and workers’) identities of not only survivor status, gender and sexual orientation, but also race/ethnicity, class, age, religion, (dis)ability status, and others.”^{9, p.9}

The literature reviewed for this paper has not lived up to Gentlewarrior's description of cultural competence. Most studies look at the intersection of two identities (i.e., female and victim/survivor), or less often, the intersection of three identities (e.g., homeless, female and victim/survivor; immigrant/refugee, female and victim/survivor; African American, female, and victim/survivor). Despite this limitation, the literature has increasingly identified the need for culturally competent services and for qualitative research that considers the multiple identities of victims/survivors of sexual violence.

Shame, Embarrassment, Guilt and Self-blame

Often victims/survivors of sexual violence feel shame, embarrassment and guilt, especially if they blame themselves for the violence.¹¹⁶ When victims/survivors experience these feelings, they are less likely to report the crime,¹¹⁴ which may be related to their feelings of unworthiness.⁹⁷ Largely because of rape myth acceptance, victims/survivors that experience a more stereotypical sexual assault may feel that the assault is more legitimate making them feel or appear less blameworthy.⁹⁵

V. Safe and Supportive Responses to Disclosures

While barriers may delay or prevent many disclosures, research has indicated that about half of victims/survivors disclose to friends or family and a significant minority report to authorities.² For some, the consequences of disclosing are positive and associated with improved psychological health,¹³⁴ increased comfort, support, and validation,⁹³ and desired outcomes such as penalizing the perpetrator and protecting others.⁹⁴

However, others experience negative reactions and consequences following disclosure. For instance, some victims/survivors report feeling hurt, angry, or responsible after disclosing to support sources.⁹³ Some are ostracized by family, friends, and/or trusted colleagues and experience hostility and rejection from their communities.^{83, 94} Some suffer or are re-traumatized by retelling the experience multiple times or experiencing interrogations by police and/or the courts that are intimidating and demoralizing.^{116, 117} Others are subjected to retaliations, reprisals, or the fear of them. Some feel the reporting made no difference, made ongoing sexual violence worse, or resulted in the loss of a job.⁸³ Not surprisingly, some victims/survivors notice a negative impact on their health and self-esteem following disclosure (e.g., lack of sleep, eating improperly, crying, lack of concentration).

Making the choice to disclose sexual violence can be very difficult and stressful. The consequences of disclosing can bring further suffering and obstacles, which may further compromise the well-being and safety of survivors. Research has shown that a victim/survivor's well-being can be affected by the type of responses received from support sources during and following disclosure. This section will discuss what has been learned from the research about providing safe and supportive responses to a victim/survivor who discloses or reports an experience of sexual violence.

Social Reactions Questionnaire

The Social Reactions Questionnaire is a tool used in research to measure the reactions given by others to victims/survivors of sexual assault. In its development, Ullman empirically validated seven reactions to sexual assault victims/survivors on three groups: survivors volunteering from the community; survivors in college; and, survivors at mental health agencies.¹³⁵ Two positive and five negative reactions were identified.

Positive reactions

Emotional support/belief is characterized by responses such as telling the victim/survivor she is not to blame, comforting the victim/survivor, listening and understanding, and showing the victim/survivor that they are believed.

Tangible aid/information support occurs when the support source provides the victim/survivor with information, helps the victim/survivor get medical care or report the assault to the police, and encourages the victim/survivor to seek counselling.

Negative reactions

Treat differently means that the support source treats the victim/survivor as if s/he is damaged, avoids talking or spending time with the victim/survivor, focuses on their own needs and not those of the victim/survivor, and treats the victim/survivor differently from before the disclosure.

Distraction is a response where the support source attempts to distract the victim/survivor from thinking or talking about the assault and encourages the victim/survivor to keep the assault secret.

Taking control occurs when the response source makes decisions or does things for the victim/survivor such as telling others without permission. It also includes treating the victim/survivor like a child or as incompetent, minimizing the seriousness of the assault, acting like they know how the victim/survivor feels when really they do not and making the victim/survivor feel like they don't know how to take care of themselves.

Victim blaming included responses like telling the victim/survivor they could have prevented the assault from occurring, stating that the victim/survivor was irresponsible and telling the victim/survivor that s/he was to blame and should be ashamed of the experience.

Egocentric response is characterized by the support source caring too much about their personal feelings and not enough about the victim/survivor's feelings. Examples include expressing so much anger towards the perpetrator that the victim/survivor has to calm the support source, the support source feeling personally wronged by the assault, the support source needing reassurance from the victim/survivor, and the support source wanting to seek revenge.

Ullman found that most negative social reactions were associated with less self-esteem and greater PTSD symptom severity and noted that this finding is consistent with prior research. Ullman found positive reactions had small positive or non-significant associations with psychological symptoms.¹³⁵ Other studies also have found that positive responses to disclosures have minimal or no impact on victims/survivors' psychological well-being.^{91, 136, 137} However, there is evidence showing that victims/survivors receiving more positive responses have more positive psychological health compared to victims/survivors that receive negative responses to disclosure.^{93, 137}

Potential Moderators

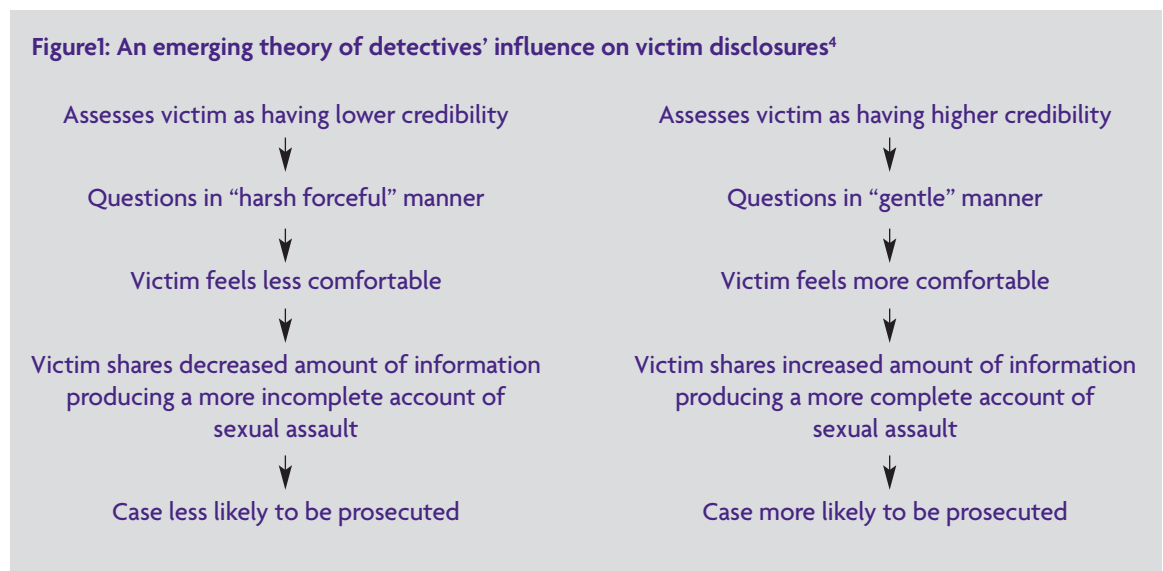
The impact of reactions to disclosures may be mediated by who the recipient of the disclosure is (e.g., family member, police) and by the survivor's perception of the intent and meaning of the response (e.g., to protect).¹³⁸ For example, emotional support was not experienced as helpful if the support source was perceived as not upset enough or too upset. Responses focusing on the victim/survivor's role in the assault were experienced as helpful or healing when it was coming from a friend, counsellor, or medical personnel and was interpreted as an attempt to protect the victim/survivor from future violence.¹³⁸

Responses Victims/Survivors Found Helpful

A Canadian study examined the experience of sexual assault victims/survivors in an emergency setting after the assault and identified behaviours of the support source that contributed to a safe environment for disclosure and help-seeking.¹³⁹ Many of the victims/survivors felt that being respected by the support provider was important in making them feel cared for. Respect was shown by treating the victims/survivors with dignity while catering to their individual needs. Active listening, eye contact, reassurance, distraction, and not rushing the victim/survivor were all behaviours by the support source (i.e., nurse) that made the victim/survivor feel comforted and safe. While Ullman described distraction as negative when it is used to prevent a victim/survivor from talking about sexual assault, distraction to help a victim/survivor cope with a forensic physical examination was considered to be helpful. It was important for victims/survivors to feel in control and this was established by the support sources providing support options and having the victims/survivors agree to all interventions. Being reassured by the support source was important to victims/survivors. Reassurance for the victims/survivors meant being believed, having feelings validated, and not having to limit what was disclosed. Finally, victims/survivors felt it was important that support sources had expertise in the area of sexual assault and were able to help victims/survivors navigate through the overwhelming amount of information provided.

In a rigorous qualitative study, adult victims/survivors of rape participated in in-depth interviews on their post-assault help seeking experiences. The victims/survivors identified positive behaviours of the interviewers and identified how those behaviours impacted them.¹⁴⁰ The study utilized feminist interviewing principles: reducing hierarchy in the interview process; providing information and linking survivors to resources; and addressing emotionality by communicating warmth and respect. Interviewers attempted to minimize the hierarchy between themselves and victims/survivors by affirming the victims/survivors' choice and control throughout the interview and by engaging in a shared dialogue and mutual disclosure if possible. Emphasizing the victims/survivors' choice and control in the interview was experienced by victims/survivors as feeling respected and comfortable, especially because they could choose what and how much they disclosed. The victims/survivors had complete control over where the interview headed and that made them feel comfortable. Furthermore, a shared dialogue or mutual disclosure was very meaningful to victims/survivors and encouraged disclosure. The interviewers also provided victims/survivors with information and links to resources. Specifically, the interviewers provided victims/survivors information that normalized their experience. For instance, the interviewers would reassure the victim/survivor that what they were feeling was not abnormal and that they were not alone in their experience. This made victims/survivors feel less "crazy" and less isolated. Victims/survivors also found it helpful and important to receive links to community resources, such as counselling, especially given that they are reliving and retelling the sexual violence they experienced. Finally, the interviewers communicated warmth, compassion and respect when interviewing victims/survivors and this made victims/survivors feel comfortable, supported and understood. Many of the victims/survivors felt comfortable with the interviewer's ability to adjust to the quick change of emotions during the interview. Victims/survivors also felt moved and cared for when the interviewer showed genuine emotion in response to their disclosure and they appreciated that the interviewers did not engage in blaming or judgmental responses.

Research on victim/survivors' experiences with reporting also furthers our understanding of supportive responses. For instance, Patterson examined the types of interactions between victims and detectives associated with prosecuted and non-prosecuted cases.¹⁴¹ She found that victims with prosecuted cases described the detectives as building rapport, increasing feelings of safety (e.g., consoling, reassuring, caring), setting a comfortable pace for the interview (e.g., told victims to take their time, gave them space), and using a "gentle" approach to questioning (e.g., careful in questioning). In contrast, victims with non-prosecuted cases described the detectives' questioning as rapid and forceful (e.g., long succession of questions, pace set by detective not the victim). In these cases, the detectives did not engage in rapport building which made the women feel uncomfortable and guarded (e.g., questioning focused less on factual information and more on the victim's character and reaction to the rape). The forceful style of interaction/interviewing was associated with lowered assessments of credibility and the gentle style with higher assessments of credibility. Based on her findings and related findings from other researchers, Patterson proposed an emerging theory of detectives' influence on victim disclosure (see Figure 1).



Finn and colleagues evaluated an online hotline for victims/survivors of sexual assault run by trained volunteers. The results showed that the majority of victims/survivors who used the hotline were satisfied with the service and would recommend it to others. Consumers of the service expressed overall satisfaction with the volunteer counsellor's knowledge and skills around sexual violence, which may play a role in survivors' decisions to disclose.¹⁴²

Carr and colleagues documented what victims/survivors of sexual harassment would want when reporting/disclosing sexual violence in the workplace.⁸³ The most common recommendation was the need for emotional support to help victims/survivors feel less isolated, feel believed and feel reassured that they are not to blame. The victims/survivors also wanted to know where to find support, information, and advocates to help them navigate through the experience; to be treated with respect and equality by support sources; more education to raise awareness about sexual harassment so victims/survivors, co-workers, and employers are able to identify and deal with sexual harassment appropriately and effectively; and to have their management/employer respond to their disclosure and to deal with the perpetrator in a more timely manner.

⁴ Adapted from Patterson, 2011, p. 1366.

Additional Suggestions for Supportive Responses

In addition to survivor feedback on supportive responses, some information exists from those likely to receive disclosures. A recent study found that the response of university faculty members to disclosure of sexual assault varied widely. Some professors who received disclosures of sexual violence engaged in practices that encouraged student-professor disclosure (e.g., emphasizing an open door policy; reaching out to distressed students; creating a safe environment for disclosures). Others used practices that minimized the potential for disclosure (e.g., screening out class material that may trigger disclosures; warning students that the classroom was not a safe place for disclosures).¹⁴³ The professors made six suggestions for effectively and appropriately responding to student disclosures of sexual violence: be knowledgeable of campus and community resources; understand the importance of listening to the student; invite guest speakers that have expertise in the area of sexual violence; have more accessible resources for support sources; have standardized training for responding to victims/survivors; and have opportunities for debriefing and self-care after receiving disclosures.

To create a safe environment for disclosure, it is important that support sources are culturally sensitive and are aware of the contextual factors that may facilitate or hinder disclosures from victims/survivors of sexual violence.¹³³ Roberts' team made several recommendations around support sources effectively and appropriately responding to disclosures of sexual violence with sensitivity to cultural differences.¹³³ First, support sources should provide a variety of ways for victims/survivors to disclose their experience. For example, some victims/ survivors may feel more comfortable answering a questionnaire or writing down their experience than talking directly to a support source. Second, support sources should not label certain experiences (e.g., labeling the experience as rape) because the cultural context, personal history, or personal interpretation of the experience by the victim/survivor may cause the victim/survivor to see the experience differently. Finally, it is recommended that support sources are aware of the potential barriers to disclosure associated with different cultures. For example, it would be important for a support source to be aware that many individuals distrust formal support systems due to historical and current racism and abuse of power.¹²⁶

When creating a safe environment for disclosures of sexual violence, it is important to discuss confidentiality. Victims/survivors are often concerned about confidentiality when they disclose sexual violence. They may be concerned others will find out or that the perpetrator will find out and retaliate.^{114, 115} Therefore, it is important that support sources inform victims/survivors about their rights to privacy and any limitations to confidentiality (e.g., threatens to harm self or others, court order).¹⁴⁴

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