



Breaking the Silence Breaking the Barriers

Executive Summary

Breaking the Silence, Breaking the Barriers

Analysis of Survey and Focus Group Data

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Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland

We offer confidential counselling, advocacy, helpline, email support, specialist information, ISVA and Group work services.

Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland (RCTN) is a charity that provides services to women and girls who live, work or study in Tyne & Wear and Northumberland.

We are completely independent of the criminal justice system including the police. Our services are free and confidential.

We are here for women and girls over 13 who have experienced any form of sexual violence at any time in their lives.

We are for all women including, but not limited to, women who identify as Lesbian, Bi, Trans and/or Questioning; Black and Minoritised women, Refugee women; and disabled women. Our definition of women-only includes Trans women and non-binary people who identify that women's services are right for them.

We won't judge, we don't criticise, we listen.

www.rctn.org.uk

Registered charity: 1138149

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Aims and Purpose of the Report

Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland (RCTN)'s volunteer Activist Group secured a small pot of money to support them in developing and delivering a campaign in 2025.

The Activists aimed to explore the impact that women's intersecting identities have on their ability to identify with the following terms: victim, survivor, trauma, healing and recovery. They will also draw links between this and the hierarchy of sexual violence and the hierarchy of victim-survivors.

The campaign will aim to reach women and girls, specifically those who have experienced sexual violence or are supporting those women and girls, either formally or informally. The Activists are aiming to ensure that the campaign reaches Black and global majority women, and other less heard women, such as LGBTQIA+ people and women with disabilities.

The Activists carried out a public online survey and focus groups with staff, volunteers and clients from three specialist services, to collect data to inform the above campaign.

They also sought to explore:

- Who those who have experienced sexual violence tell first.
- Barriers to access to support services
- The prevalence of sexual violence in relation to multiple experiences

Participants

The Activists gathered views through the use of an online survey & focus groups held with:

- **Action Foundation:** a service supporting those in the sanctuary seeker community
- **GAP (Changing Lives):** a service supporting those who are or have previously engaged in sex work
- **Rainbow Home:** a service supporting LGBTQIA+ sanctuary seekers

The online survey was open to members of the public, but aimed at those who have endured sexual violence (SV).

In total, 110 people engaged with the survey. However, not all of these respondents completed the survey. Response rates to individual questions varied from 18 to 100.

Key Findings

Terminology

The responses to the use of different language highlighted the following trends:

Victim

Responses to this word were overwhelmingly negative. People told us that 'victim' has connotations of 'weakness' & 'powerlessness'.

Survivor

Survivor has more positive connotations. Some people shared that it can be unrelatable for those who have experienced additional trauma - war, physical violence, poverty, homelessness.

Trauma

Responses to this reflected that it helps give gravity and a name to their experience. However, those with additional trauma (discussed above) were less likely to feel able to apply the term "trauma" to their experience/s of sexual violence.

Healing

The responses to this showed that it isn't a term used by many of those who have experienced sexual violence in relation to their experience but would use it in terms of physical health.

Recovery

Online responses were more positive about this term as it is seen as an ongoing process, rather than an end goal. Responses from the focus groups differed however, as this term is used more often in relation to substance misuse or dependency.

"I much prefer the term Survivor to Victim, but I rarely feel like I have survived the experiences. That feels like a term celebrating and having overcome everything, whereas the only way I sometimes feel I have survived is by still being alive. My entire previous world/life/self, did not survive"

Online respondent

Overall, people shared wide-ranging views towards the terms above, demonstrating the need to use language chosen by the survivor, with the view of putting control of their experiences back into their hands. This can inform the work of professionals by making sure that we are working in a person-centred way and to allow the client/patient/service user to take the lead in their journey.

Note: Whilst there was no consensus on the terminology used to refer to those who have experienced sexual violence, we predominantly use the term 'survivor' in this report.

Telling others about experiences of sexual violence

We found that people usually tell a family member or friend first about their experience/s of sexual violence.

This shows that it is important for those close to survivors of sexual violence that they are coming from a place of belief and are able to offer a safe space for the survivor to talk about their experience/s.

Barriers to Support

We also found, however, that despite this being the first-place survivors would turn to for support, telling family or friends can also presents a barrier to accessing support.

This can be due to the fear of not being believed, feeling responsible for their experience and the minimisation of women's experience of sexual violence in comparison to other 'more traumatic experiences'.

"I felt like my experiences were minor in comparison to other people as all occurred in public and it only happened once so felt it was not worthy of reporting".

Online survey respondent

This highlights the need to continue working on dismantling the myths and victim blaming around sexual violence. Our findings demonstrated that demographics made little difference to the fear of not being believed and the pervasive nature of victim-blaming and rape culture.

"[The] fear of not being believed, as this is what the perpetrator told me"

Online Respondent

Addition Barriers for Marginalised Group

The report found that those coming from marginalised communities faced additional barriers to sharing their experience/s and getting support.

These included:

- Those who identified as LGBTQIA+ shared that they had experienced of fear of being outed and additional heteronormative assumptions.

"[Professional] assuming the perpetrator is male"

Online survey respondent

- Survivors who are sanctuary seekers faced fears of other statutory services being involved and posing as a risk to their asylum claim.
- Those who experienced sexual violence whilst they were engaged in sex work

"Fear of rejection from families is common with clients [who have been involved in sex worker] because they already feel judged because of this"

Focus Group attendee, GAP

Multiple experiences of sexual violence

The majority of survey respondents who had experienced sexual violence, had experienced sexual violence more than once.

The research found that most respondents (87.5%) had experienced sexual violence on more than one occasion. This was found to be even higher amongst the respondents who considered themselves to be disabled (92%) and those who identified their sexual orientation as something other than heterosexual (91%). This could reflect that the prevalence of sexual violence throughout our society as being higher than general assumptions and not something that is experienced as a 'one-off' incident.

Recommendations

We plan to use what we found to inform our campaign and awareness raising activities.

Targeting members of the public and professionals with messaging about our services and how to support survivors, hoping to create more confidence in family and friends of survivors. We will do this through online campaigns, printed publications and public events.

We will also promote our findings with professionals from different sectors – NHS, Local Authorities, VCSE, Criminal Justice. This is with the aim of making sure that the message that terminology is key to supporting someone in their service and the importance of allowing the person receiving support to choose the language that is most comfortable for them.

Through these actions we will continue the work to remove the barriers that survivors face when attempting to get support, as well as carry on our own work dismantling victim-blaming and rape culture.

What we have found through our research is that those who have experienced sexual violence still feel carry shame and blame themselves, rather than this being placed, where it belongs on perpetrators and those who fail to act to end sexual violence.

"When I did tell my doctor that I was raped aged 14 they did nothing. Then a counsellor years later asked me what I did that made me a victim. Trusting others with that info after that was hard. It always felt like my fault"

Online Respondent