

# **Sexual Violence, Masculinity and the Journey of Recovery**

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## **Background**

Sexual violence has been recognised as one of the most frequent forms of lived trauma worldwide (WHO, 2013). Given their predominance as survivors, women have been the almost exclusive focus of research and support in this area to date. However, the growing number of studies exploring the sexual abuse, sexual assault and rape of boys and men has broadened the discourse around sexual violence and gender identity. Although the profound consequences are common to survivors regardless of gender, it is evident that particular aspects are connected to the manner in which the trauma is processed and expressed. There is a dearth of evidence on the experiences of men who seek professional help, such as counselling, nonetheless. Given the increasing number of male survivors accessing Irish Rape Crisis Centres (RCCs) (RCNI, 2015), the need for counsellors to have knowledge of gender relevant interventions is of vital importance.

## **Aim**

In this paper, we explore how norms of masculinity influence the recovery process in the context of RCC counselling in the Republic of Ireland.

## **Method**

This paper draws on the qualitative findings of a larger doctoral study aimed at investigating the nature and effectiveness of RCC counselling using a mixed-methods approach involving survivors and counsellors. A particular focus of the interview phase of this research involved understanding how gender facilitates or impedes recovery. The findings from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with male survivors are presented in this paper.

## **Results**

The analysis revealed that gendered norms influence the recovery process in a number of complex ways. Three themes emerged from the personal accounts shared by participants, namely coping with the traumatic impact of sexual violence, help-seeking, and emotional exploration and expression. Each of the participants acknowledged that they found it difficult to accept the fact that they were victims of sexual violence and discussed how the trauma has affected their sense of masculinity and/or sexuality. They also reported a lengthy delay in help-seeking, particularly those who experienced child sexual abuse. The participants further discussed the difficulties they have experienced in relation to emotional exploration and expression and the progress they have made in this regard.

## Discussion

By highlighting men's engagement with masculine norms, the findings provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which men 'do' and 'undo' gender in the context of sexual violence (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987). These findings indicate that, despite the difficulties men may experience, given time and support, they can learn healthy ways of dealing with their emotions. They further indicate that the trust that is built in the therapeutic relationship is central to survivors feeling comfortable to express their vulnerability and emotions.

## Conclusion

The findings enhance our understanding of the gendered nature of healing and have important implications for practice. Moreover, they contribute to an expansion of the conceptual space for men who adopt an alternative masculinity that promotes healthy behaviours (Kia-Keating et al, 2005; Emslie et al, 2006; Lisak, 1994).