



# **Dublin Rape Crisis Centre**

## **Submission to Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality**

4 March 2020

## About Dublin Rape Crisis Centre

The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (DRCC) aims to prevent the harm and heal the trauma of all forms of sexual violence in Ireland. The DRCC has been at the forefront of the Irish response to sexual violence for more than 40 years. Our mission is now more important than ever with demand for our services reaching record levels in 2018. These services include:

- Running the National 24-Hour Helpline;
- One-to-one counselling and support;
- Accompaniment services for those reporting to An Garda Síochána or attending court; and
- Outreach services, training, awareness-raising, advocacy and policy analysis.

Through our work in the DRCC, we see first-hand the life-long consequences of the trauma and harm caused by sexual violence of all kinds. These serious consequences negatively impact health, families, relationships, social well-being, education and work.

## **Why is sexual violence an issue of gender inequality?**

Sexual violence is a form of gender-based violence which targets individuals or groups on the basis of their gender. Harmful gender stereotypes and roles imposed on us from birth and ingrained in us throughout our lives mean that we are not always equal in relationships and/or in sexual relations. We must address why a power imbalance between people can result in acts of sexual violence. Personal safety and respect, both inside and outside the home, is essential to ensure a person's full and effective participation in all areas of life. The importance of all sexual activity being consensual and equal cannot be underestimated for a person.

While sexual violence impacts all genders, it primarily affects women and it has a disproportionate impact on women. In 2018, as in previous years, about 80% of those who contacted the National 24-Hour Helpline run by our centre were women. About 90% of those who availed of our therapeutic services were women. Thus, while sexual violence is no respecter of gender and while the power imbalance in relationships can impact on all genders, the impact of sexual violence on women as a gender is disproportionate to their representation in the population.

## **What is DRCC asking for?**

- That the prevention and tackling of the epidemic of sexual violence in Ireland be named as an area of priority for government;
- That a clear, comprehensive line of responsibility to government, with appropriate resources and powers be established;
- That victims of sexual violence have adequate and timely access to the services that they need in the health and justice systems;
- That comprehensive, trauma-informed training is provided to all personnel involved in providing frontline services to victims of domestic, sexual and gender based violence;
- That an office of Digital Safety Commissioner be established, and that legislation is enacted to criminalise online harmful communications;
- That an integrated courts welfare system be established with appropriate facilities and wraparound services for victims of sexual violence; and
- That the recommendations of the National Council for Curriculum Assessment relating to comprehensive sexual health education be implemented without delay.

## Understanding sexual violence

Sexual violence can take many forms. It can be online or offline. It includes not only rape and attempted rape, but also sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and trafficking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and sexual harassment. It can be part of domestic or other violence.

The last SAVI Report in Ireland in 2002 stated that 42% of women and 28% of men experienced some form of sexual abuse/assault in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Demands for DRCC's services reached record levels in 2018, with more than 13,300 contacts received by our helpline. With 2,771 sexual offences being reported in 2018, we believe that the prevalence of sexual violence is very much currently underestimated.<sup>2</sup> There is a need for comprehensive, robust and disaggregated data on all forms of gender-based violence in Ireland so that the true extent of the problem can be fully understood.

## Online sexual violence

Online gender-based sexual violence is real and can have profoundly negative effects on a person. This more recent type of sexual violence is already proving to be quite prevalent, particularly towards young women.<sup>3</sup> Online sexual violence includes:

- Non-consensual sharing of intimate images and videos (also known as revenge porn);
- Online exploitation, coercion and threats;
- Online sexual harassment;
- Sextortion; and
- Unwanted online sexual conduct.

A commonly accepted definition of this form of violence must be acknowledged and a strategy to deal with online sexual violence must be implemented. We ask for the establishment of a Digital Safety Commissioner, adequate investigation and prosecution of online crime and implementation of model legislation already prepared by the Law Reform Commission to deal with harmful communications.<sup>4</sup> Several countries worldwide have enacted laws that prosecute perpetrators of revenge porn in recent years.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hannah McGee, Rebecca Garavan, Mairéad de Barra, Joanne Byrne and Ronán Conroy, 'The SAVI Report' (The Liffey Press 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Central Statistics Office, Recorded Crime Victims 2018.

<sup>3</sup> According to a 2018 European Parliament Report, 1 in 5 young women in the EU have experienced online sexual harassment [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL\\_STU\(2018\)604979\\_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604979/IPOL_STU(2018)604979_EN.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Law Reform Commission, 'Report on Harmful Communications and Digital Safety' <https://www.lawreform.ie/news/report-on-harmful-communications-and-digital-safety.683.html>

<sup>5</sup> The Centre for Internet and Society, 'Revenge Porn Laws Across the World' <https://cis-india.org/internet-governance/blog/revenge-porn-laws-across-the-world>

## Effects of sexual violence

Sexual violence can bring about effects such as lowered self-esteem, trauma and other mental health issues. As well as psychological effects, sexual violence can negatively affect a person's economic situation. Research indicates that a victim of sexual violence may experience a decreased income over their life.<sup>6</sup> Sexual violence can disrupt employment for various reasons. In an analysis of Victim Impact Statements of rape trials between 2000 and 2005 in Ireland, the following economic issues were mentioned:<sup>7</sup>

- Time Off Work - just over 25% of cases
- Moved Away - just over 21% of cases
- Economic Loss - almost 17% cases
- Lost Job - 9% of cases

The cost of mental healthcare and other medical care, as well as the cost of loss of quality of life means that victims, who are mainly women, are often unable to fully realise economic equality when their basic safety and well-being, both inside and outside their homes, is not guaranteed. Sexual violence can cause major disruptions to a person's career trajectory, including those in politics and leadership. The recent phenomenon of online sexual violence can have a particularly negative effect on women entering politics due to a more violent rhetoric often being used when discussing female political candidates. Recent examples in Ireland, the United Kingdom and in the United States show how online sexual violence such as rape threats and the effects that these threats can have on women taking part in political life.<sup>8, 9, 10</sup>

When the individual impact on each victim of sexual violence is combined, we can see the wider social impact of sexual violence and how it can result in an unequal society.

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<sup>6</sup> Rebecca M. Loya, 'Rape as an Economic Crime: The Impact of Sexual Violence on Survivors' Employment and Economic Well-Being', (2015) 30(16) Journal of Interpersonal Violence 2793.

<sup>7</sup> Rape Crisis Network Ireland, 'Rape and Justice in Ireland' (The Liffey Press 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Maggie Astor, 'For Female Candidates, Harassment and Threats Come Every Day', The New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/24/us/politics/women-harassment-elections.html>

<sup>9</sup> Dimitri O'Donnell, 'Abuse, threats lead to women quitting UK politics', RTE News <https://www.rte.ie/news/uk/2019/1109/1089721-uk-election-female-candidates/>

<sup>10</sup> Sunday with Miriam interview with Fianna Fail's Lisa Chambers, Fine Gael's Regina Doherty, Labour's Jan O'Sullivan & Independent Katherine Zappone on February 16<sup>th</sup> 2020. Listen at 21mins: <https://www.rte.ie/radio1/sunday-with-miriam/programmes/2020/0216/1115631-sunday-with-miriam-sunday-16-february-2020/?clipid=103329983> & <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/life-as-a-female-td-if-i-had-a-euro-for-every-time-i-ve-been-called-the-c-word-1.4175498>

## **The treatment of cases of sexual violence**

Harmful stereotypes of victims and of perpetrators of sexual violence can lead to biases and inequality in our justice system and in our society. These stereotypes can affect anyone from those in decision-making positions (legal, judicial, law enforcement) to those in the general population.

The credibility and reputation of the complainant in a sexual offences case is regularly the main focus of the defence of an accused person. Thus, harmful stereotypes about how a person looked or dressed can influence how an investigation and trial proceeds. This in turn means that victims of sexual violence may be reluctant to access appropriate remedies in our legal and justice system.<sup>11</sup>

Both within the justice system and in wider society, the victim of sexual violence is often blamed for what happened to them. This leads to a real reluctance to report offenders. Sexual offence reporting rates are notoriously low. These cases have a very high rate of drop-off after reporting, occurring at many different stages in the criminal justice system.

This impacts on our whole society, including permitting those who carry out the abuse to continue free from sanction or accountability.

The impact of the trauma of sexual violence on victims is not well understood. It can affect victims differently, and not necessarily how we would expect it to. It is a real harm which can damage a person to their core and impede their capacity to live a full life.

We ask that comprehensive, trauma-informed training is provided to all personnel involved in providing frontline services to victims of Domestic, Sexual Gender-based Violence, including medical personnel, legal personnel, educators and social workers. There is also an urgent need for ongoing awareness raising for our society more generally.

We ask that an integrated courts welfare system is established with appropriate facilities and wraparound services for victims of sexual violence.

In addition, we cannot ignore the reality that young people are growing up in an increasingly complex world when it comes to sexual behaviour and relationships. Many are receiving appropriate support at home and in schools to equip them to the best extent possible to cope with those complexities. However, many are not.

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<sup>11</sup> Law Reform Commission, 'Knowledge or Belief concerning Consent in Rape Law' (2019) pgs. 7-16.  
<https://www.lawreform.ie/fileupload/Reports/LRC%20122-2019%20Knowledge%20or%20Belief%20Concerning%20Consent%20in%20Rape%20Law.pdf>

The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) has recently published recommendations recognising the need to update the now 21 year old programme around sexuality education and consent.<sup>12</sup> Children and young people have a right to information and education on basic matters that affect their physical, mental and emotional development and well-being.

We ask that the government fully implements the NCCA recommendations to ensure there is no delay in providing young people with comprehensive sexual health education to give them the tools they need to make decisions that can impact their health and well-being for the rest of their lives.

### **For information**

We end with a reminder for anyone who may be interested that our telephone counsellors are available for information, support and confidential non-judgmental listening on the 24-Hour Freephone National Helpline at 1800 77 88 88. Further information on the work and services of the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre can be found at [www.drcc.ie](http://www.drcc.ie).

### ***For further information, please contact:***

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<sup>12</sup> Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in Primary and Post-Primary Schools  
<https://ncca.ie/media/4462/report-on-the-review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse-in-primary-and-post-primary-school.pdf>

## **Appendix: Case Studies**

Our therapists, telephone staff and volunteers are very experienced in the specialised work of dealing with victims of sexual violence, with many of them having over a decade of experience. There are 15 other Rape Crisis Centres around the country, each working in a particular geographical area. Due to the size of the capital city, we are undoubtedly the biggest centre. We also have nationwide reach because we run the National 24-Hour Helpline.

*Below is an amalgam of experiences from women and men accessing our services who are victims of sexual violence.*

### **Intimate Partner Violence**

A 26-year-old woman contacts the National 24-Hr Helpline. Her opening words are “maybe I should not even be bothering you with this”. The telephone counsellor encourages her to speak a little about what brought her to make the call in the first place. What follows is a snapshot of a young woman’s life in the Ireland of 2018. Mum to two young boys, a three-year-old and a 3-month old baby, the second little fella was a bit of a surprise, well more than a bit! The arrival of baby number two means there is no hope of her going back to work; they can hardly pay the rent, let alone afford childcare. She knows they are now eligible for the Working Family Payment but finding the time to sit down and go through the 16-page document is proving very difficult. Her partner will not do it, yet he will not look after the two boys when he comes home from work to let her do it. He gets irritable whenever she mentions their need to apply for extra financial support. For a brief moment, the telephone counsellor wonders if she should refer her on to an agency that could provide more practical support. Her subsequent sentences, however, confirm to the telephone counsellor she is on to one of the two National Helplines that can provide her with help and support.

She talks about how difficult their relationship has become, that it is so centred on money or the lack of it. She feels he blames her for getting pregnant, if they only had the one her mum would have continued to mind their older son and she could be out there working too but her mum says she is not able to mind them both. Their deteriorating financial situation make him angry all the time. There have been a couple of occasions within the last couple of months where she had not been in the humour for making love but felt she should, sure that’s just the way it is sometimes between couples isn’t it? That rhetorical question hangs there for a moment or two before she goes on to speak about the night he came home, and he forced her to have sex.



She was annoyed with him for being so late home, for being so loud and drunk that he woke the baby and then he had the cheek to want to have sex. Afterwards she just lay there wondering how the man she loved could treat her so despicably no matter how annoyed, angry, or frustrated he was feeling. She could not look or speak to him the next day and when she did, what she wanted to say came out the wrong way. He told her to stop being so hysterical. It was the following day that the bruises around her neck where he tried to strangle her and the bruises and bite marks on her breasts and inside legs were visible. When she tried to speak of what had happened that night, he accused her of being neurotic, sure that's what happens when you want it rough!

As the weeks passed and the evidence of that night came and went, she stopped bringing it up and things went back to the way they were, more or less. Increased financial pressures will undoubtedly affect a person's self-esteem and self-worth. These emotions reverberate into relationships. What happened for this caller was a devastating eruption of her partner's anger, which will have lasting consequences. Her dependence on him reduced her practical options for leaving an abusive and physically unsafe environment, therein exposing her to perhaps another situation of sexual violence. What this woman has in common with 4.5% of the callers to the National 24-Hour Helpline is that in speaking with a telephone counsellor she disclosed that the perpetrator of her abuse was an intimate partner.

### **Childhood Sexual Abuse**

A 35-year-old woman is receiving counselling in DRCC for past childhood sexual abuse. She has been attending her therapist for almost a year in relation to issues that only surfaced since the death of her uncle, who was the perpetrator of her abuse. The abuse began when she was 14 years of age, when her mother was taken into hospital for a major operation, which required extensive convalescence. With her father in work during the day and her elder siblings away at college, she was packed off to stay with her aunt and uncle so her schooling wouldn't be affected by all the upheaval at home. The abuse occurred during that 5/6-month period she was with them. When she returned home, she never mentioned what happened during her time away. Stays in hospitals due to an eating disorder, self-harm and depression marred the remainder of her teenage years. Her family, especially her siblings thought she was just attention seeking because their mother who was now quite incapacitated by ill-health was no longer able to spoil her the way she had before her illness.

Her attendance at school was sporadic and she finished without any real qualifications. Having left home, she drifted from one low paying job to the next. In all that time, she had minimal contact with her family. She found relationships with men very difficult, but a chance encounter with an old school friend provided an introduction to a man she later went on to have a child with. The process of pregnancy and childbirth were particularly challenging for her, triggering her past trauma to resurface. Her silence around her past abuse meant that those caring for her were not aware of her history and so labelled her difficult. No one ever took the time to talk with her, as oppose to talking at her. Motherhood wasn't any easier. It left her feeling anxious a lot of the time about her ability to parent. She raised her daughter while her partner worked. Like many who provide care within the home, she received no income for that work. When her daughter started school, she decided to look for a part-time job. With little or no experience, her choice was limited and further hampered by trying to find a position that fitted it in with her daughter's school hours. Like many victims of childhood sexual abuse, she had spent much of her teenage and adult life suppressing the traumatic details of her abuse, the consequences of which impacted various spheres of her life including lost opportunities for education and employment.

Of the 582 clients seen by DRCC in 2018 almost 40% experienced abuse in their childhood where 21% of the perpetrators were relatives.

## **Rape**

A 50-year male is out with some work colleagues to celebrate securing a new client contract. His team worked hard, and he felt they deserved to let their hair down and enjoy themselves. He declined their invite to continue partying elsewhere. He let them off, preferring one last drink at the bar while texting his wife to say he'd be leaving soon. He grabbed his coat and phone. He headed for the loo prior to leaving. As he reached the door into the toilets someone bumped against him and before he had an opportunity to turn around, he felt himself being propelled forward into a cubicle. His forehead made contact with the wall. His head hurt but that was nothing compared to the intensity of the pain felt elsewhere in his body. Even when he knew he was alone in the cubicle he was too scared to turn around. What happened next is a blur. He had no real memory of how he got home but he did. He got through the barrage of questions the next day about why he was so late home. His bad humour that weekend was blamed on a hangover.

While his team regaled him on Monday morning with their stories of how the remainder of the night went without him, he struggled to keep his temper under control, snapping at the group in front of him that there was work to be done.

As the days turned into weeks his mood didn't lift, his family worried, his work colleagues gave him a wide berth. He tortured himself with questions as to why he didn't somehow fight off his attacker. He knew he couldn't tell anyone what had happened. What would he say? What would they say? Would people wonder why he didn't defend himself, worse still would people think he was gay. Apart from the bodily invasion, it was the sense of being overpowered, of having all control taken from him and not knowing who his perpetrator was that kept him awake long into the nights. By day he threw himself into his work and when he wasn't working, he used the pressures of work to deflect questions from family and friends about the change in his humour. And when the struggle of pretence got the better of him, he sought solace in alcohol to numb the memories until even that stopped working.

When it comes to male rape, gender norms collide with trauma and so many survivors like this caller to the helpline feel guilt or shame, wondering how they let it happen, was there some hidden vulnerability that caused them to be targeted. Embarrassment, stigma, fear of not being believed are but some of the reasons given by the 5% of male callers to the National Helpline in 2018 for not disclosing their rape to anyone except those on a confidential helpline who ask but are not offended when the invitation to give even a first name is declined.