



Key Recommendations

- ❖ Establish a central focal point in government to co-ordinate all actions needed to bring about a society free – or at least intolerant – of sexual violence
- ❖ Recognise that those harmed by sexual violence need access to appropriate services in the health & justice system
- ❖ Build better awareness of the harm of sexual violence to reduce its tolerance in daily life
- ❖ Increase our understanding of prevalence of & trends in sexual violence through better data collection
- ❖ Ensure our young people have access to the emotional development & sexual health education they need

Dublin Rape Crisis Centre

Submission to Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality

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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. We provide services including running the National 24-Hour Helpline, one-to-one therapeutic counselling and other supports to survivors; accompaniment to those attending Sexual Assault Treatment Units, Garda stations and court; and education, training and advice to a wide range of people. In addition, we use our expertise and experience to provide reports, analysis and policy proposals to those tasked with action on behalf of victims/survivors of sexual violence. 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?

We will never have gender equality while sexual violence continues. Sexual violence – rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment - occur either because of a false sense of entitlement on the part of a person or group of people who believe that they can engage in sexual acts without the consent of the other. It also occurs when a person abuses the power that they have, or believe that they have, over another person. Sexual violence impacts all genders. For men, for those in same-sex relationships and those with diverse sexual and gender identities, there are additional barriers to reporting that may be grounded in other experiences of societal discrimination. A 2014 European study noted that 43% of transgender respondents avoided expressing their gender fearing violence¹. Nonetheless, sexual violence primarily affects women and it has a disproportionate impact on them. Harmful gender stereotypes and roles imposed from birth and ingrained through culture and officialdom, as well as long-ignored exploitation, mean that we have all accepted as normal something that is, in fact, blatant inequality in the area of intimate relationships. Such stereotypes also impede full gender recognition for those outside the traditional gender stereotypes. Personal dignity, respect and bodily integrity, are fundamental rights which are essential to ensure a person's full and effective participation in all areas of life.

What will it take to fix this problem?

Even before COVID-19, the largely hidden problem of sexual violence was often called an epidemic.

We agree. Like with an epidemic, we need multi-faceted responses:

- to look after those who have been injured;

¹ FRA. (2014). Being trans in the EU: Comparative analysis of the EU LGBT survey data.
https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2015-being-trans-eu-comparative-summary_en.pdf

- to build a culture that does not tolerate those who carry out the abusive behaviour; and
- to develop community knowledge on behaviour and attitudes to avoid repeating the harm.

The solution will include:

- A central focal point in government to co-ordinate all necessary actions to bring about a society free – or at least intolerant – of sexual violence;
- That our society builds increased awareness of the very widespread harm of sexual violence and as a result, reduces its tolerance of it, in daily life and our legislative and general legal system;
- That those harmed by sexual violence need access to appropriate, empathetic services in the health and justice system;
- That our young people immediately receive the emotional development and sexual health education they need;
- That we increase our understanding of the prevalence of sexual violence and its trends through better data collection.

What would we be like as a society if we fixed these issues?

- The numbers harmed by sexual violence would be reduced;
- We would grow our respect for each other, with ever reducing stereotypes about the innate purpose of a person based solely on their sexual stereotypes; and
- Everyone, of every gender, would recognise that those with whom they engaged in sexual relationships was their equal; and would treat them accordingly.

Understanding sexual violence

Sexual violence 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 happen online as well as offline. It can be part of domestic or other violence. A comprehensive Irish report in 2002 found that 42% of women and 28% of men experienced some form of sexual abuse/assault in their lifetime.² Demand for DRCC's services reached record levels in 2019, with more than 14,159³ contacts received by the National 24-Hour Helpline. With reports of 3,307 offences to Gardaí in 2019,⁴ we believe that the prevalence of sexual violence is currently seriously underestimated. We need comprehensive, robust, disaggregated data on all forms of gender-based violence so that the true extent of the problem can be fully understood.

²Hannah McGee, Rebecca Garavan, Mairéad de Barra, Joanne Byrne & Ronán Conroy, 'The SAVI Report' (Liffey Press 2002)

³ DRCC Statistics Supplement 2019: https://www.drcc.ie/assets/files/pdf/statisticssupplement_a5_web.pdf see page 4

⁴ CSO: Recorded Crime Victims 2019: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rc/recordedcrimeq42019/>

Effects of sexual violence

Sexual violence can bring about effects such as lowered self-esteem, trauma and other mental health issues. It can negatively affect a person economically.⁵ The cost of mental healthcare and other medical care, as well as the cost of loss of quality of life means that victims, primarily women and vulnerable minorities, often cannot fully realise economic equality. Sexual violence can cause major disruptions to a person's career trajectory, including those in politics and leadership. 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.

The culture surrounding sexual violence.

Even though it is now more common to hear from those who have survived sexual violence, a culture of blame and secrecy still surrounds it. Victims still blame themselves. The credibility of a complainant in court, how they dressed ahead of sexual activity, or their sexual experience with the accused or others, is often a crucial part of a court case. In a survey in 2016, some 21% of Irish people participating thought there were occasions when non-consensual sex with a woman was justified.⁶ Harmful stereotypes of mainly female victims and of male perpetrators of sexual violence can lead to biases and inequality in our justice system and in our society. This in turn means that victims of sexual violence may be reluctant to access appropriate remedies in our legal and justice system.⁷ This situation creates discrimination and inequality which is, or should be, unacceptable and which contributes to general gender inequality.

Young people

Young people are growing up in an increasingly complex world when it comes to sexual behaviour and relationships. Many receive appropriate support at home and in school to equip them to the best extent possible to cope with those complexities. However, many do not but rather depend on friends and pornography. This not only risks harm to and/or by young people now or in the future, but also contributes to the continuation of inequality and stereotyping. Recommendations published in 2019 by the NCCA for second level schools should be implemented immediately.⁸

⁵ 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.

⁶ Special Eurobarometer 449 Report Gender-based Violence 2016:
<https://www.rte.ie/documents/news/gendervbasedviolence-ireland.pdf>

⁷ 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>

⁸ 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>