

Sexual Violence in an Intimate Partner Relationship 'Finding Colour'

Sexual violence is a concerning, common component of many abusive relationships. Layers upon layers of abuse can often leave sexual violence buried deep - difficult to comprehend, difficult to articulate, difficult to overcome. When women experience sexual violence, their view on the world often shifts; "I don't see the beauty in flowers anymore." "I feel dirty." Women we've supported will often say that it's like they've lost the colour in life...they report as seeing only in grey.

Fear of not being believed, fear of having to relive the abuse and the fact they were once in an intimate and consenting relationship with the perpetrator, means that incidents of sexual violence are massively under-reported by victims with too few prosecutions in courts. Perpetrators prey on this silence.

Types of violence women suffer are wide-ranging, frightening and for us, unimaginable - but very much part of daily life and struggle for victims. Some examples include rape, attempted rape, use of weapons, forced to engage in sexual acts and forced body augmentation to name only a few. The effects of sexual violence are also extensive and can include forced or multiple pregnancies, internal and external injuries, STIs, miscarriage and forced abortion. A web of feelings and emotions women experience as a result can include shame, guilt, self-loathing, low self-esteem, hopelessness and fear. A victim may feel like she is always on edge. Her trust has been breached, her dignity stripped, her self-worth corroded. She feels alone, depleted and in darkness.

"I used to get joy in children laughing. But even that has been tainted by the cruelty and betrayal of my adult world."

Women suffering from sexual violence in their relationships may be groomed over time where a perpetrator coerces and creates a desensitisation of what she is forced to go through. Victims are often required to risk assess 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The invisible grip and chronic fear of what might happen if she doesn't comply evokes a sense of self-blame, she is not only controlled physically, but through her emotions as well. It can be a daily challenge to keep a perpetrator deescalated and placated in order to survive and protect her children.

The rise of revenge porn has given perpetrators a public sphere to increase the humiliation and degradation of a victim. Personal information can be used as a weapon to blackmail, intimidate and exert power and control over a woman and attempt to destroy all aspects of her life. The ripple effect of her abuse goes beyond the confines of her home. The horror seemingly impossible to escape - emotionally, mentally and physically.

Women's Aid works with women who have experienced trauma as a result of domestic and sexual violence and advocate on their behalf to send out a clear message that it is unacceptable in Northern Ireland.

We work with our partner agencies to ensure support measures are in place and readily available to women when they need them most. We provide women with a safe environment where she can talk about her experiences and the affects they are having, knowing that she is not to blame for her abuse and that she is not alone. She is a witness to what has happened to her and will not allow herself to be silenced by what she has went through. We work with and support women to break the silence around her abuse by listening, understanding, believing and not judging her. In doing so, women are empowered with the tools to see the world in colour again, to not just survive - but to thrive.

Contact us: 02890 666049
24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline: 0808 802 1414
The Rowan Sexual Assault Referral Centre: 0800 389 4424
Nexus: 02890 326803
If in an emergency dial 999, if it is not and you would like to report to the PSNI, dial their non-emergency telephone number 101.

Dympna McKeown & Sarah Bruce

women's aid

Belfast and Lisburn