

WWP EN



WWP || EUROPEAN NETWORK

Addressing sexualised violence in
the work with perpetrators



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Addressing sexualised violence in the work with perpetrators

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with an addition by Neil Blacklock (WWP EN Chair, RESPECT)*

Sexualised violence is a very complex issue – not only is it often difficult to identify and talk about, but many forms of sexualised violence are also normalised and therefore not properly addressed. Additionally, the public debate engages in “victim blaming” and focuses on sexualised violence victims/survivors and their perceived “responsibility”, making perpetrators practically invisible. Due to the scope and complexity of sexualised violence, it is often referred to as public health crisis or even silent health epidemic.

The work of WWP EN and its members is focused on men’s violence against women and children, and addressing sexualised violence should be an important part of this work. However sexualised violence has not been given enough attention within the network, and the need for a better, more in-depth discussion on sexualised violence is strong.

Development and facilitation of a better conversation and experience exchange on sexualised violence within WWP EN is a necessary response to a certain discourse change our society is facing today. #Metoo, its voices and demands made sexualised violence visible for the general public which led to a broader discussion on its causes and consequences, consent, public and institutional responses to different form of sexualised violence and its prevention. In this sense, the purpose of the current expert paper is to discuss:

- (I) various definitions of sexualised violence;
- (II) the role of language in creation of understanding of this issue;
- (III) forms of sexualised violence;
- (IV) addressing sexualised violence in the work with perpetrators;
- (V) importance of work on prevention of sexualised violence;
- (VI) ways forward – what can WWP EN and its members do to address sexualised violence.

I. What is sexualised violence?

There are different definitions of sexualised violence.

The notion of sexualised violence is defined in international documents, treaties, strategies and action plans, various definitions are offered by national as well as international institutions, authorities, NGOs, experts, etc.

Among the most widely recognised and used definitions of sexualised violence are the following:

1. World Health Organisation (2002):

“Sexual violence is defined as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”.¹

¹ World Health Organisation. Sexual Violence:
http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/violence/sexual_violence/en/

2. Istanbul Convention (2011):

*“Violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.*²

Article 36 of the Istanbul Convention gives a more specific picture of what sexualised violence actually is, namely:

- (a) *engaging in non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral penetration of a sexual nature of the body of another person with any bodily part or object;*
- (b) *engaging in other non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a person;*
- (c) *causing another person to engage in non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a third person.*³

Moreover, in the same article it is stated that these acts are to be considered violent even in case they are committed within an intimate relation – against (ex-)partners.⁴

3. United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993):

*“... the term ‘violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.*⁵

II. Language matters – making perpetrators responsible

In order to create a better understanding of what sexualised violence is and what forms and expressions it may take it is important to pay attention to the language that is used to describe it. So why “sexualised violence”? Because violence has nothing to do with sex and expression of ones sexuality, it is not a sexual act. ‘Telling like it is’ is crucial because otherwise, when “forcing (his) tongue into (her) mouth” is described as a ‘French kiss’, when rape is reformulated as ‘unwanted sex’ and when prostitution is presented as ‘consensual sex work’, violence gets hidden and mutualised. In other words, it implies that the victim is at least partly to blame for violence and at the same time completely conceals the fact that violent behavior is unilateral and solely the choice and responsibility of the perpetrator.⁶

Adequate language should emphasise perpetrators and their responsibility for violence.

The majority of men are not violent but about 98% of sexualised violence is committed by men. At the same time women, young women and children are overrepresented among sexualised violence victims/survivors. For instance, some national studies conducted by UN Women show that up to 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexualised violence from an intimate partner at least once

² Council of Europe (2011). Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, p. 3.

³ Council of Europe (2011). Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, p. 10.

⁴ Council of Europe (2011). Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence: the requirements of IC “apply to acts committed against former or current spouses or partners as recognised by internal law”.

⁵ Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993):

<http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

⁶ Wade, A., Coates, L. (2004) *Telling it like it isn't: obscuring perpetrator responsibility for violent crime*, p. 5. *Discourse & Society*, vol. 15(5): 3–30.

in their lifetime.⁷ According to the official statistics on rape from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå), in 96% of rape cases committed among adults and reported in 2016 the victims were women.⁸ 99% of all suspected for rape of women in 2016 were men.⁹ Globally, in accordance with the statistics from the World Health Organisation about 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexualised violence within intimate partner relations or sexualised violence perpetrated by a non-partner¹⁰ at some point in their lives.¹¹ These statistics as well as the other data on the issue of sexualised violence, clearly show the gender and power structure of violence – in other words, sexualised violence is men’s violence against women and children.

III. Forms of sexualised violence

Sexualised violence exists in various forms and expressions.

The ways these different forms of sexualised violence are addressed depend, first of all, on how they are defined in the national legislations and international documents but also on how they are defined and understood by the organisations that work with victims/survivors and/or perpetrators as well as with violence prevention.

Here are some of the forms of sexualised violence:

- rape;
- sexual harassment;
- child sexualised abuse;
- incest;
- prostitution;
- human trafficking for sexualised exploitation;
- pornography;
- stripping;
- sexting.

Many of these forms of sexualised violence are perpetrated within intimate partner relations and combined with physical, psychological and other forms of men’s violence against women. For instance, rape is often perpetrated within marriage/intimate partner relations. Pornography hypersexualises and objectifies women and by that normalises men’s violence against women; its consumption does in many cases work as catalyst/inspiration for perpetrators to use sexualised violence against their partners.

The latest study on sexualised violence conducted by the Swedish crisis centre for young women and girls – *Föreningen Storasyster*¹² – clearly shows that (ex-)partners constitute a big group of perpetrators of SV:

- 49% of the respondents indicate that their perpetrator was a person they knew;
- 46% of the respondents were subjected to sexualised violence by their partner(s);
- 35% of the respondents suffered from sexualised violence perpetrated by their ex-partners.

⁷ UN Women (2018). Facts and figures: Ending violence against women: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

⁸ Brå. Summary on crimes reported in 2016, p. 16:

https://www.bra.se/download/18.5484e1ab15ad731149e3a81c/1490859029793/Sammanfattning_anmalda_2016.pdf

⁹ Brå. Summary on persons suspected for crimes in 2016, p. 30.

¹⁰ The statistics does not include sexual harassment.

¹¹ UN Women (2018). *Facts and figures: Ending violence against women*: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>

¹² Föreningen Storasyster. (2019). *5211 Voices about Sexualised Violence*, p. 22.

Men's violence against women in intimate partner relations has been a major focus of the work of WWP EN and its member organisations since the time the network was built. At the same time, the issue of sexualised violence has not been addressed enough within the networks, and the experiences of perpetrator programmes worldwide show how difficult sexualised violence in intimate partner relations is to reveal, talk about and follow up on after the end of the programmes.

IV. Addressing sexualised violence in the work with perpetrators

Many specialists/counsellors working with perpetrators identify sexualised violence as an issue/topic that rarely gets discussed. For instance, according to the counsellors of Manscentrum in Stockholm, very few men contact Manscentrum in order to talk about sexualised violence they perpetrate against their (ex-)partners. Nevertheless, in case the counsellors ask questions specifically related to sexualised violence, the men's responses often show that the violent acts they perpetrate include different forms of sexualised violence.

Perpetrators' willingness to talk about sexualised violence depends on different factors.

First of all, sexualised violence is a difficult topic for men to open up about especially when perpetrator programmes are arranged as so-called group treatments.

Secondly – and most importantly – it is often difficult, if even possible, for men to differentiate between sex and sexualised violence, consensual behaviour and absence of consent. At the same time, when it comes to women victims/survivors, it is usually easier for them to identify sexualised violence being perpetrated to them by their (ex-)partner.

The statics from Heimilisfriður – the Icelandic centre offering perpetrator programmes as well as (ex-)partner contact – is quite evident here.

Thus, Diagram 1 shows that while the majority of men ("clients") attending the perpetrator programme are aware of the physical and psychological violence being perpetrated by them towards their partners, only 2% of men indicate that they have been perpetrated sexualised violence during three months prior to the beginning of the perpetrator programme. The follow up three month after the perpetrator programme is completed, indicates that the respondents – according to their own perception – completely stopped using sexualised violence.

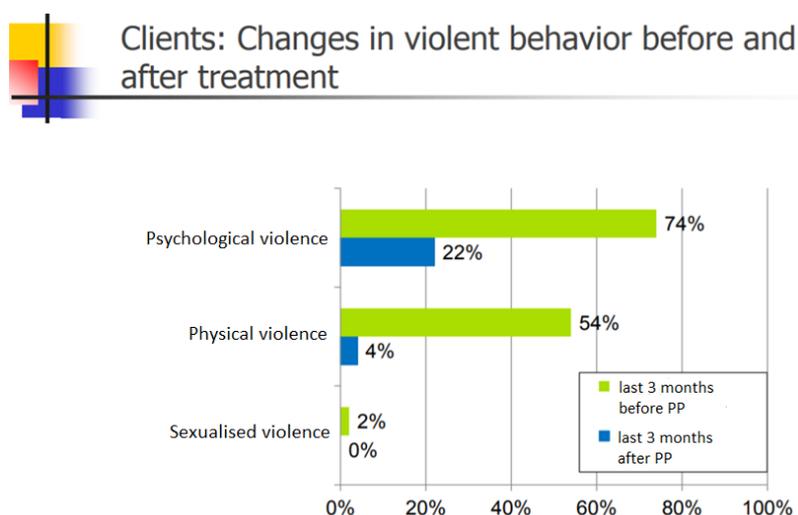


Diagram 1¹³

¹³ Ragnarsson A., Jónsson E. G., (2016). Heimilisfriður (Domestic Peace): treatment for men and women who are violent in close relationships. Presentation during the Conference Confronting Gendered Violence: Focus on Perpetrators, Helsinki, November 30-December 2, 2016:

http://cgv.hi.is/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/3_AndresRagnarson_DomesticPeace_TreatmentApproachesInIceland.pdf

Spouses: Changes in violent behavior before and after treatment

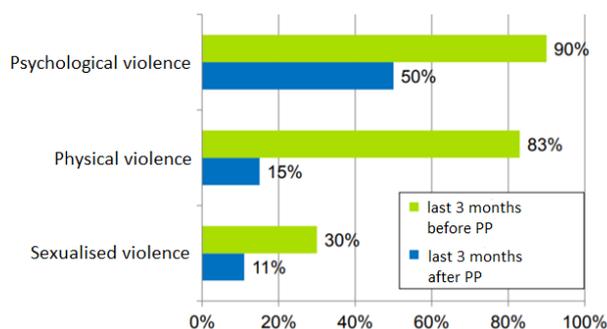


Diagram 2¹⁴

And what about these men's partners?

Diagram 2 shows that 30% of women indicated that they have been subjected to sexualised violence by their partners during three months prior to the beginning of the perpetrator programme. And even though the diagram shows the decrease of sexualised violence after the programme is completed, there are still 11% of women that continued experiencing sexualised violence perpetrated by their partners.

This data clearly illustrates the absence of understanding of what sexualised violence is and which forms it takes, as well as a certain discrepancy between how sexualised violence is understood by men and women.

At the same time it is important to point out that the lack of understanding of sexualised violence is not only typical for men, but also for women, especially when it comes to sexualised violence perpetrated in intimate relations.

As one of the respondents in Föreningen Storasyster's study "5211 Voices about Sexualised Violence" puts it:

"For me as a victim, it is difficult to know what counts as abuse, and what does not, especially in a relationship with a partner. Without a proper understanding and knowledge on sexualised violence it is easy to start thinking that something is wrong with you, that you are a freak, and that the things that he did to you were not that dangerous – in fact they were normal".¹⁵

That is why it is crucial that perpetrator programmes actively work with the issue of sexualised violence, ask perpetrators and – in case of partner contact – (ex-)partners about sexualised violence, help them define and understand what is it, its forms and consequences.

¹⁴ Ibid.

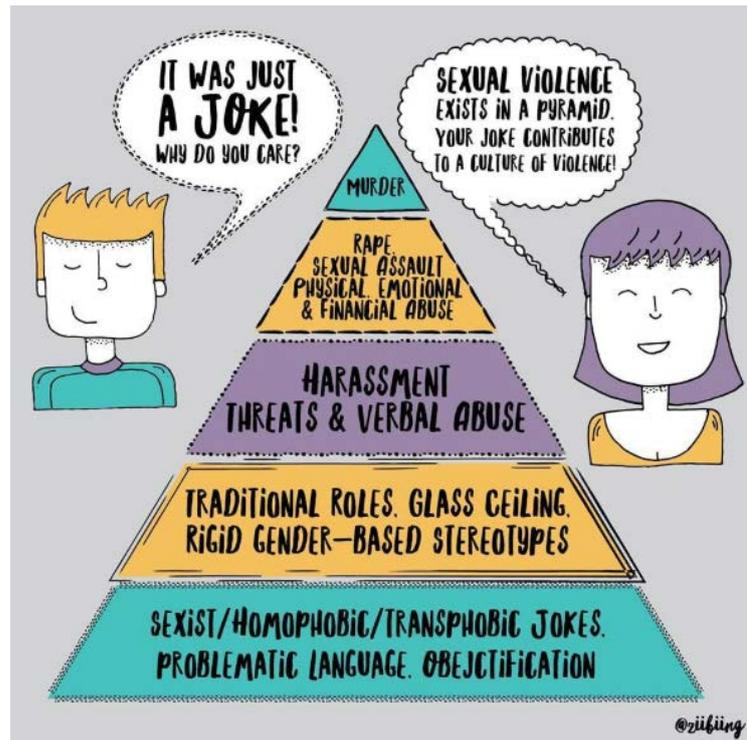
¹⁵ Föreningen Storasyster. (2019). *5211 Voices about Sexualised Violence*, p. 22.

V. Prevention of sexualised violence

At the same time as more space should be given to the issue of sexualised violence within work with perpetrators and victim support services, more attention and effort should be put into work on prevention of sexualised violence, awareness rising campaigns and advocacy measures.

It is important to work with young people helping them:

- define and better understand sexualised violence, its forms, causes and consequences;
- question existing norms around sex and sexuality, and redefine them;
- get a better grasp of the notion of consent and each other's boundaries; and as a result
- develop and explore their own sexuality.



The importance of work on prevention of sexualised violence can be illustrated by the so-called pyramid of sexualised violence¹⁶: the earlier the society starts working with youth questioning and transforming sexist attitudes, destructive masculinity norms, hyper-sexualisation and objectification of women and girls – the more effective the society gets in preventing more extreme and brutal violence from happening.

The central part of the work on prevention of sexualised violence today is addressing pornography and its harms. Being easily accessible through webpages where one can be completely anonymous, being free of charge and quite acceptable in the today's society, pornography has become children's main source of sex education. However, instead of learning about sex and pleasure, they learn about violence and assault; instead of learning about consent and how to respect each other's boundaries boys learn how to push girl's limits; they get to know that girl's "no" always means "yes" while girls learn that sex should be painful. That is to say, pornography confirms and reinforces destructive masculinity norms, inspires men's sexualised violence against women, confirms and reinforces men's sexist attitudes and behaviours.

So far young people have practically been left alone processing the messages of pornography, being deprived of their right to develop their own sexuality free from violence and torture as it (sexuality) has already been hijacked by the pornography industry. And here the whole society, including organisations working with perpetrators, with all their experience and expertise, need to step up and start talking about pornography's destructive consequences with youth. Otherwise the work on prevention of sexualised violence will simply not be effective.

¹⁶ Fairbanks A., Pyramid of sexual violence: https://www.instagram.com/p/BRs5UE_FNY9/

VI. What can WWP and its members do to address the issue of sexualised violence?

Taking into account the complexity of the issue of sexualised violence as well as the fact that it has not been given enough attention in the work of WWP EN before, the first step towards a more structured and efficient work on sexualised violence and its prevention for WWP EN would be data collection and mapping of definitions, ways of understanding and addressing sexualised violence that exist among the network's member organisations.

Based on the results of this mapping as well as the values and goals of the network, it would then be possible for WWP EN to define its approach to addressing different forms of sexualised violence.

As prostitution is the essence of men's violence against women and expression of men's perceived entitlement to women's bodies, it is important that WWP EN gives a better platform for discussions on the issue of prostitution, first of all, in order to understand member organisations' positions and attitudes in this regard. The same goes for such issues as pornography, stripping and other forms of sexualised exploitation of women and girls.

As perpetrator programmes might be lacking knowledge and experience on sexualised violence, it is crucial for WWP EN to facilitate trainings and experience exchange between specialised victim support services and perpetrator programmes on the issue of sexualised violence. WWP EN could also encourage member organisations to initiate this kind of processes on local and regional levels.

An important step for WWP EN could also be to include the topic of sexualised violence and its different forms in the network's awareness raising campaigns, webinars and social media communication.

Finally, as WWP EN has a good practice of building working groups focusing on specific questions/issues, it would be good to look into possibilities to build such a working group with a focus on sexualised violence as this group could develop and facilitate the work/measures mentioned above.

Some practice suggestions for working on sexual violence and abuse with those who perpetrate domestic abuse

By Neil Blacklock (RESPECT), WWP EN Board Chair

- Make the sexual abuse/coercion a recurring part of the intervention so that it is included and mentioned throughout, e.g. when talking about other types of abuse, rather than being confined to a module on sexual abuse.
- As a team, you need to talk about your views and feelings around sexual respectful behaviours with colleagues/co-workers before you start working on this topic. It is much better to find out early that you have very different experiences and views than in the middle of a critical moment in a group programme.
- Look after yourselves and your colleagues. Working with perpetrators of domestic abuse can disturb any of us at any time, you and your colleagues need to know how to recognise when you are not ok and know how to respond to that. Preplanning for that and sharing that with colleagues can be helpful.
- Men who perpetrate domestic abuse can also have experiences of being victims of sexual abuse. If this comes up, you should not ignore it. In perpetrator interventions, when sexual abuse/respect is part of the conversation, it is not uncommon to get disclosures. This should not deflect the work, but people who are acknowledging that they were sexually abused need to feel that this is seen, understood, and validated. Being able to respond to this with additional individual sessions is important. If the person has not placed responsibility for the abuse they experienced with their abuser, they will find it more difficult to take responsibility for their own behaviour.
- This strand of work needs to involve the Women's Support Service so that they are aware of how the sexual abuse is dealt with, what will be covered in the work, and when. This will allow them to inform partners and ex-partners, and address any specific needs or safety concerns.

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