

Written evidence submitted by Survivor A¹(INV0039)

Summary of the experiences of Survivor A, a survivor of sexual violence

Warning: this summary contains distressing material.

1. The police

- 1.1.** Survivor A said that her experience of abuse had been bad, but her experience of reporting to the police had also been an ordeal.
- 1.2.** Survivor A has experience of reporting more than one case of rape to the police.
- 1.3.** The second time Survivor A reported, the police were unhelpful. She pushed herself through the stress of reporting, as she felt she would do some good by reporting what had happened, but a police officer said that her actions counted as consent. She initially thought the decision to take no further action had been taken by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), but now thinks it was that individual police officer. No video interview was undertaken, and she didn't receive anything in writing. She felt that the fact the abuse had been happening over a number of years was a barrier to the case being taken forward, and that if it had been one incident the police would have been more open to investigating it. It was really hard to deal with, and meant that when she experienced sexual violence again, she didn't know how to respond, and even if what she was experiencing was rape, because of what the police officer had told her about consent. The police felt to her not like one collective service responding to rape; instead, lots of different people made individual decisions and generally did not check with the CPS. On one occasion, she rang them back and they quizzed her on why she was calling them.
- 1.4.** Most recently, a specialist service supported her, making the report to the police for Survivor A, as she wasn't comfortable ringing 101. She said when you call 101, they can transfer you to a different department, and then it goes quiet, and you don't know when you're getting a call back. However, a No Further Action (NFA) decision was taken, due to an exchange of messages they'd found on his phone. Survivor A said: 'He's mentally manipulated them just as much as he was doing to me.' Survivor A is currently making use of the Victims' Right to Review (VRR) Scheme.
- 1.5.** Overall, Survivor A said the police's communication with her has been poor. She said that, 'With all these things, I don't know what they were doing.' The word 'investigation' makes you think that something is being done. But in her case, she never knew what they were doing. They didn't keep her updated. You'd never know when to expect them. With her recent case, over one weekend, she received a call from the police, asking to arrange a video interview. A felt the police should only call Mondays to Fridays, as otherwise your 'off days', when you think you can relax, will be disrupted. They should also say when they will ring. The police also call using withheld numbers, and this can be frightening. Survivor A is concerned that it is a perpetrator trying to contact her.

¹ 'Survivor A' has been used to protect the individual's identity, as she would prefer to remain anonymous. 'Survivor A' is her preferred term.

- 1.6. When she was told about the most recent NFA decision, the police officer had rung Survivor A beforehand to arrange to come to her house and explain the next stage of the investigation. There was no indication that an NFA decision was being made, and so when they arrived and told her it was a huge shock. She fortunately had friends with her so she was not alone, but this was not as a result of police consideration. She said that one of the officers left a sweat patch on her sofa and she felt this was down to nerves. She said it must be soul-destroying for the police to have to convey news like this: 'All these victims going through the trauma of the police process and not getting anywhere.'
- 1.7. The police didn't always follow up, or explain why they weren't following up. Her specialist service had told the police about some concerns she had about the perpetrator's behaviour towards young women. A police officer said they would be in touch for more information. But nothing came of it. Survivor A was also concerned that the perpetrator kept firearms at his property, and this made her feel unsafe. The police are aware, but Survivor A doesn't know what, if anything, they might be doing to ensure her safety. She said that if he turns up at her house, the police now know to send armed police. Survivor A said, 'So, basically, I need to get shot before they'll do anything.' Her Independent Sexual Violence Advisor has advised her to keep her doors locked, but this is hard, as she has a dog who needs to go outside.
- 1.8. Survivor A reflected on one positive change. When she reported in the early 2010s, the police turned up at her house in uniform and in a police car; they now arrive in plain clothes and in a plain car, so neighbours don't know the police have been round.

2. Reporting

- 2.1. In terms of what can be done to encourage more people to report, Survivor A said that hearing about other people's stories can be a source of inspiration and strength, referring to Nadine Harkness' charity, Speak Out Bravely. Survivor A said that documentaries about sexual assault and television or reality television which include narratives about rape or people speaking about their lived experience can also be useful.
- 2.2. Survivor A also said that it can be helpful for some people to be able to report anonymously, and not through the police, if you didn't want to go through the criminal justice system but wanted to tell someone what has happened. For her, however, seeking justice is important. The police need to know about perpetrators, as they don't just do it once, they can do it continuously. There is a website already available for this action.

3. Housing

- 3.1. Survivor A had recently undergone the distressing experience of receiving a letter from her local council terminating her tenancy contract. Survivor A felt that each council should have a dedicated member of staff to support people who were living through sexual violence and domestic abuse. It is extremely stressful to have to deal with the police, at the same time as constantly fearing the perpetrator coming round to the house. When facing such challenges, it is hard to keep on top of other parts of your life, and survivors need support to ensure they do not end up facing debt, financial difficulty or issues with housing. Perhaps a specific referral by police to the council so that the council do become aware.

4. Awareness and education

- 4.1.** When asked what one thing she would change about the criminal justice system's response to survivors of rape, Survivor A said that it was hard to say, almost as if both her arm and her leg had been injured and she'd been asked which one hurt the most.
- 4.2.** Survivor A said 'education, education, education.' This is essential, particularly around the effect of trauma. Survivor A referred to Zoe Lodrick's work around trauma, and said that the Freedom Programme had helped her to understand her trauma response. Responses are fight, flight, freeze, flop and friend. Survivor A said that rape victims can flop to protect themselves. A person might mould themselves to the perpetrator to stop themselves being physically hurt. They may be in a family environment, and so will give in to the perpetrator's demands so children don't overhear or get hurt themselves.
- 4.3.** Survivor A also said that many people think that if you go out after dark, you'll get attacked, when actually, most often, people are raped by somebody they know. She said that psychological manipulation can come before the sexual violence as well. Survivor A initially had a small number of consensual sexual encounters with a date, which led her to believe he wasn't a threat to her. Survivor A said that, 'As it turned out, I couldn't trust him.'
- 4.4.** Survivor A became pregnant as a result of rape by her date. Although she felt he had forced himself on her, she didn't think of it as rape at the time. When it first happened (in the early 2000s), she wasn't asked, 'How did you become pregnant?' She felt it is important to have leaflets in GP surgeries; these could at least plant a seed in someone's mind that the way they are being treated by their partner is wrong.
- 4.5.** In the early 2010s, Survivor A did see a leaflet on domestic abuse, which asked questions around a partner's behaviour. This helped her to recognise her partner's controlling behaviour towards her.

5. Impact

- 5.1.** Survivor A spoke about the trauma that can result from sexual violence, for example, complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She felt suicidal as a result of her experiences, and took an overdose. She said that, although she has a lot of friends, she can still feel alone at times.
- 5.2.** It's important that people who have experienced sexual violence are able to look after their wellbeing, for example through outdoor activities, like Survivor A says that Nadine Harkness has spoken about. Animal therapy can be useful. Survivor A finds spending time with her friend who looks after horses helpful; she says it gets her out of the house and stops her dwelling so much on what has happened to her.

6. Support

- 6.1.** Survivor A hasn't always had access to specialist support. Recently, her university's wellbeing team referred her onto a specialist service. She felt that it's positive the service has a neutral name, as then people aren't aware of what support you're accessing and why, if you'd prefer to keep that information private.

- 6.2.** Survivor A was then assigned an ISVA, who was helpful but also didn't have the answer to some of Survivor A's questions, particularly around whether it was possible to reopen cases with the police. In the end, she had to find out herself. After, when she got back in touch with the specialist service (she had decided not to pursue the case for a time at the outset of the pandemic), they helped her to report her most recent case, and to ask the police to reopen the previous case. The police then referred her to another ISVA, who after a time went quiet, which was stressful; it transpired that she had been on long-term sick leave, but no one had proactively reached out to let Survivor A know. She is now with a new caseworker who is brilliant, and who has face-to-face meetings with Survivor A at A's house.
- 6.3.** Survivor A will also be receiving free legal advice through Citizens Advice. She feels survivors need to know what their rights are and where they stand. They don't necessarily need a lawyer, but they need to have more information about what to expect. The free advice is only 20 minutes.

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