



CENTRE FOR
Women's Safety
and Wellbeing

YOUNG WOMEN FORUM: SEXUAL VIOLENCE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

DECEMBER 2022



Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing acknowledges the Whadjuk Nyoongar people as the Traditional Owners of the land where our office is located. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation, and we pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the continued deep spiritual attachment and relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to this country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

Recognition of Victims and Survivors

The Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing recognises the strength and resilience of adults, children, and young people who have experienced domestic, family, and sexual violence and acknowledge that it is essential that responses to domestic, family, and sexual violence are informed by their expert knowledge and advocacy.

We pay respect to those who did not survive and acknowledge friends and family members who have lost loved ones to the preventable and far-reaching issue of domestic, family, and sexual violence.



We would like to thank all the young women who took part in the CWSW 'Young Women Forum: Sexual Violence'. It was a privilege to listen to your passionate, impressive, and inspiring discussions.



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Introduction

In October 2022, the Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing (CWSW) held the 'Young Women Forum: Sexual Violence' to engage young women in the community in CWSW's sexual violence advocacy work. The forum provided an opportunity for participants to share their views on the drivers and impacts of sexual violence and systemic issues and necessary reforms related to sexual violence prevention and response.

The forum was held in the context of the release of the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032* (National Plan) earlier in October 2022, which for the first time has a specific focus on sexual violence. The National Plan highlights the prevalence and impacts of sexual violence against girls and young women, as statistics demonstrate that girls aged 10 to 17 make up 42% of female sexual assault victims in the recorded crime statistics¹, and over 51% of women in their twenties have experienced sexual violence in Australia².

The forum was also held in the context of actions being taken at the State level. In September 2021, the Office of the Commissioner for Victims of Crime and the Department of Communities announced the development of Western Australia's first *Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Strategy* (Strategy). The Strategy is currently being developed with guidance from the Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Reference Group – which is comprised of representatives from government and non-government organisations with content matter expertise, including CWSW, and individuals with lived experience of sexual violence.

In addition to the Strategy, two complementary reviews are being undertaken to look at Western Australia's sexual offence and consent legislation in the *Criminal Code Act 1913* and the criminal justice processes for victims of sexual offences. The former is being undertaken by the Law Reform Commission of Western Australia, with public consultations due to open in early 2023, and the latter will be undertaken by the Department of Justice, with a final report due to be released in May 2024.

The 'Young Women Forum: Sexual Violence' engaged young women in the community to share their views on the day-to-day impact of sexual violence; the contributing factors to sexual violence perpetration; areas requiring targeted prevention initiatives; and supports and services for victim-survivors.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). 2022. *Recorded Crime – Victims, 2021*. ABS Website.

² Townsend, N., Loxton, D., Egan, N., Barnes, I., Byrnes, E., & Forder, P. (2022). *A life course approach to determining the prevalence and impact of sexual violence in Australia: Findings from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health* (Research report 14/2022). ANROWS.



The day-to-day impact of sexual violence

Forum participants expressed that sexual violence and its impacts are pervasive and insidious, affecting every aspect of their lives and constantly occupying space in their minds. Reasons for this include:

- Fear of sexual violence victimisation
- Trauma from past experiences of sexual violence
- Retraumatism due to reminders of victimisation within daily lives
- Retraumatism due to systemic responses to sexual violence

Participants described being held back from participating in society and reaching their full potential due to fear of victimisation:

The whole idea of 'live life to the fullest'... I get angry with that quote, because I'm like, well we can't, because we're constantly boxed in, we're constantly on the lookout, and we're constantly living in fear.

Participants shared the view that sexual violence and its impacts are imbued within, and often drive, their decision making, and stated that this impacts all areas of their lives, including their:

- Engagement in social, recreational, professional, educational, and daily activities
- Presence in public and private spaces and events
- Independent mobility outside of the home
- Interactions with family, friends, and colleagues
- Viewing of television, movies, and other media
- Pet-ownership decisions
- Financial decisions

Participants stated that these factors impact their mental and physical health and wellbeing, professional and educational outcomes, and financial security.



The impacts of sexual violence on young women's decision-making in their day-to-day lives are evident in the following statements:

You're constantly thinking 'how I can avoid something happening?'

I can't go to that event because I have to catch the bus late.

You can't watch something because it looks like [the perpetrator] or acts like them.

I can't say this to my boss because it's a very sexist, misogynistic environment.

I want to walk my dog at night. Will my partner come? If not, my dog's not getting walked.

Participants expressed that past experiences of having their bodily autonomy and safety taken away from them, can present in self-blame and control-seeking as a strategy to cope with the trauma from, and fear of, victimisation:

You want to be in control because you have to be in control but it's out of your control.

My daily living is, I just constantly want control. [...] A lot of victim-blaming and self-blaming comes from 'if I can tell myself that it was my fault, even if logically I know it's not, then I'm able to tell myself I can prevent it from happening'. [...] Whereas if I have to accept the fact that I had nothing to do with it, then it's not in my control.

Participants stated that the impacts of sexual violence are so ingrained in young women's lives that they are often experienced subconsciously:

It affects every aspect of my life without explicitly thinking about it.

All of that is subconscious. It's not actually the words of 'sexism' or 'sexual violence' that comes up. It's very ingrained and I think it applies to all aspects of your life.

There's a lot of subconscious things in terms of getting anxious if it's a salesman who appears masculine or getting anxious if it's a person who looks similar to one of the perpetrators. Sometimes you don't even realise – but I'll check my heartrate and I'm like 'oh okay, this is an issue'.



Participants described their past experiences of sexual violence as being continually present and on their minds, as well as on the minds of their family and friends:

It's always there. Even if you think you're fine or over it or whatever you think, it's always still there. Like it's right at the very back. Pops up when it wants to.

From what had happened to me years ago – wake up, don't think about it, and I'm going out and I'm like 'Oh is that him? Oh, no it's not', 'Oh, here's this girl [that knew about it]. What's she going to think of me?'. Even my mum will be like 'I went out and I thought I saw him'. So, now it's in her mind, and in my mind, and my sister's mind, and my friend's mind.

Participants described how the normalisation of sexual violence can affect how victim-survivors process their own experiences and can lead young women to continually question, minimise, and discount their experiences of victimisation:

I think more young women are being more aware that this happens to a lot of people. But it's also thinking back and thinking 'did that happen?'. It's not knowing 'do I recognise that as violence or not?' and trying to identify it.

It plays in your head, like are you making a big deal? Is it even real or are you just being dramatic? Because you're a girl and you know, 'they're dramatic'.

Am I just overthinking it?

There are so many different things that you have people come forward and are like 'I didn't think that was an act of sexual violence, I thought that just happened to everyone'.

Participants stated that self-doubt can be exacerbated for victim-survivors with experience of mental illness due to the weaponisation of mental illness to discredit and assert doubt on victim-survivors' disclosures.

Participants expressed that the onus to prevent sexual violence is placed on and felt by women every day, as are the impacts of sexual violence, meanwhile society does not hold men accountable for addressing the drivers of sexual violence, and enables perpetrators to continue in their daily lives without consequences:



The onus is completely on women. Everything we do, from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep. It's constantly on us.

What I feel on a very low-grade but constant level is frustration, and I'm sick and tired of being a sitting duck. I get really pissed off that I have a vagina and that I'm a woman and that I have to buy a safety keychain and I have to keep an eye out and I have to coverup.

I think about it every single day and it won't even cross [the perpetrator's] mind once.

I actually saw one of my perpetrator's [recently]. [...] I just remember thinking 'how the hell do you have the audacity to float around as if you aren't one of the worst people to ever exist'. [...] Part of me wanted to run away and part of me just wanted to scream at him.

Contributing factors to the high rates of sexual violence perpetration

Participants described “patriarchy” as an overarching driver of sexual violence, embedded within all areas of public and private life. Participants stated that historic and prevailing male-governed and male-dominated political and social systems foster environments in which sexual violence has been and continues to be condoned and facilitated. Overarching mechanisms through which this occurs include:

- Inequitable access to leadership and governance positions and “power”
- The irresponsible use, misuse, and abuse of this power
- Dominant narratives pertaining to gender roles and the normalisation of associated attitudes and behaviours which lead to and constitute sexual violence
- Prevention of sexual violence not being embedded systemically
- Systemic responses to sexual violence enabling future perpetration by failing to hold perpetrators accountable and reinforcing the dominant narratives which drive perpetration in the first place.

It's to do with a sense of entitlement plus disrespect towards women.

If we go and report things – if we go to any of these systems, [there] is that patriarchy.

Participants described a systemic dynamic in which boys and young men learn about relationships and sexuality through agents which normalise and engender sexual violence:

- The absence of respectful and healthy relationship and consent education embedded and imparted within the education system; coincides with

- Mainstream pornography predominantly displaying male violence against women and mainstream media glamorising gender-based violence; and
- Family, teachers, and peers modelling and/or condoning gender-based violence.

I think it's a lack of education with men.

It's not necessarily porn itself, but the vast majority of porn is violent porn.

I think that people learn these behaviours, specifically from their parents. [...] A lot of them have the mindset of 'you're my wife so I can have sex with you whenever I want'.

If you think that's normal, then you think you're being normal and not perpetrating. I'm sure there's a lot of men that don't realise that they are perpetrating when they do it.

Participants described this dynamic as operating within a culture which socialises boys to be dominant:

If you don't sexually harass women, then you're called 'whipped' or you're a 'pussy'.

A big source of shame for men is showing weakness. Aggression is becoming the default.

Participants felt that the justice system fails to deter men – particularly re-offenders – from perpetrating sexual violence, as it is rare for the justice system to hold perpetrators accountable. Participants said that this sends the message to men that they will get away with perpetration of gender-based violence, including sexual violence.

Many of the participants believed that the criminal justice system presents significant systemic barriers which prevent victim-survivors from accessing justice and perpetrators from being held accountable, including:

- The system is not trauma-informed and results in victim-survivors being deterred from reporting, police dismissing disclosures and deterring cases from progressing, victim-survivors dropping their cases prior to the end of trial, perpetrators not being found 'guilty', and victim-survivors being retraumatised throughout the process.
- The system is particularly unsafe for victim-survivors who have intersecting and ongoing experiences of systemic oppression, including Aboriginal women, women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and people within the LGBTQIA+

community. Victim-survivors from these backgrounds experience heightened risk of adverse outcomes from engaging with the system.

- The length of trials is too long and contribute to the lack of reporting and attrition rates, which in turn prevents perpetrators from being held accountable.
- The standards of evidence make it almost impossible for a perpetrator to be held accountable in sexual violence cases.

These barriers and their impacts are evident in the following statements:

My court case went on for a year and a half. In that time, I spoke to maybe two female officers, everyone else was male. I was told 'This man has a family and he's a really hard worker, so maybe you should just give it a break'. It is things like that that make women want to drop a case.

When I went to police, the night I escaped, they said 'Oh he probably didn't mean to strangle you, he probably didn't mean to rape you, like are you sure?'

I told [the police] everything, and he goes '[...] Why didn't you just fight him off?'

I was told that my mental health was going to come into the court case – that he was going to use it as evidence.

With my court case, there were so many times where I wanted to just drop it.

And then there's the fact that if you go to court, you report, you have a trial, you're likely to lose. It's a lot of stress on you and time and effort and money and all of that, for the chance that you're probably not going to win.

I had evidence of messages he had sent saying [he did it and apologising]. Anyways, it's been [years] and they're still trying to make sure that the evidence is still like true.

I'm forced to go through with this court date that still hasn't happened – but I don't want to go through with it, because I'm scared I'm going to lose because I lost a restraining order against this person, let alone getting him convicted. If you can't get the basic smallest first step of getting a restraining order, what hope do I have of winning this court case after years of so much time and effort?

Participants described systemic barriers related to the civil justice system which prevent victim-survivors from accessing justice and perpetrators from being held accountable, including:

- Lack of legal support for victim-survivors throughout the civil justice process
- Thresholds for 'harm' making Violence Restraining Orders (VROs) unobtainable
- Minimal penalties for breaking VROs do not function as deterrents for re-offending

When I went, they didn't have the legal aid officer that was there, so I represented myself in court [...]. I didn't know anything and that was really, really, really difficult.

After the incident [of sexual violence], I was like 'I'm gonna go get a restraining order against him, he keeps coming up to me at [an education institution]. They wouldn't give it to me because he hadn't physically hurt me or gone near me in two weeks.

There's not enough penalty happening for these people and they're reoffending.

They just get a slap on the wrist. It's literally nothing, it's like a \$200 fine.

In addition to the lack of perpetrator accountability within the justice system, participants stated that responses to perpetration from parents, teachers, and peers minimise and condone sexual violence, and engender future perpetration:

You've groomed these boys, and the parents and teachers are like 'Make sure you're nice to the girls', and then when it happens, they don't go and say 'No that isn't right', they just say 'Oh, it's okay. You didn't mean to'.

The next day no one would come up to me because they didn't want to – you know, 'I was sensitive' – but they wanted to be there for him, because 'he's struggling too'. The rest of the school was there for him, until he did it to another girl.

Areas requiring targeted attention for prevention initiatives

Participants shared the view that sexual violence is present across all areas of public and private life and stated that a whole-of-society preventative approach is needed to address the underlying drivers of perpetration.



I think young women feel unsafe wherever men are. It's not just nightclubs, it's not just late at night, it's literally wherever men are.

There needs to be more digging into the men. Why do you perpetrate?

Participants highlighted that this requires men being actively engaged in recognising, being accountable to, and addressing the underlying drivers of their attitudes and behaviour, and being champions of change within the community.

I'd like to see a man taking accountability.

I personally love seeing guys get up there and say 'I'm a feminist'.

Participants stated that the education system plays a key role in prevention and advocated for a whole-of-schools approach to address gender-based violence – including sexual violence – and expressed that schools provide the opportunity to:

- Educate children and young people on respectful and healthy relationships, including but not limited to consent;
- Counter dominant narratives regarding gender roles and exposure to associated attitudes and behaviours within the home, community, and media;
- Engage boys and young men in exploring and processing their emotions safely; and
- Identify and support children and young people at risk of, or experiencing, abuse.

Participants supported the introduction of age-appropriate consent education into schools from foundation through to the end of schooling, however they shared the view that broader education on respectful and healthy relationships needs to be implemented and stated that this needs to be extended beyond schools to universities.

Even with the consent programs being brought into schools, there are people that are now in university and workplaces that never received that and maybe never will.

Participants highlighted that the lack of perpetrator accountability within the justice system deters victim-survivors from engaging with the justice system and fails to deter men from future perpetration. Participants stated that the system needs to:

- Be trauma-informed, victim-centred, safe, and accessible for all victim-survivors;
- Increase its capacity to handle cases with faster processing and trial times; and
- Have higher penalties for perpetrators and re-offenders.

Participants said that this will provide victim-survivors with “*some sort of hope in the system*” and send the message to men that perpetrators will be held accountable.

Participants stated that sexual violence and attitudes and behaviours which lead to sexual violence, are often perpetrated in front of others, and expressed that top-down approaches to prevention “*only do so much*”. Participants felt that people need to be equipped to hold each other accountable within their social circles, and community, professional, and academic environments, with bystander intervention training.

Participants described a ripple effect from bystander interventions, where once one person expresses that they do not condone attitudes and behaviours which lead to or constitute sexual violence, other people follow. Participants said that this:

- Empowers the victim-survivor and disempowers the perpetrator;
- Dismantles the normalisation of sexual violence; and
- Cultivates a culture in which sexual violence is not condoned or engendered.

Participants shared the view that sexual violence toward women within the workplace is prevalent and that it is enabled by a systemic failure to hold workplaces and perpetrators accountable. Participants described the need for independent regulators to hold workplaces and perpetrators accountable.

Participants identified drink spiking as a significant issue and stated that this requires targeted prevention initiatives, and advocated for physical preventative mechanisms, such as drink covers, to be supplied to patrons free of charge at licensed venues:

Pretty much every woman I know has been spiked.

It happens to everyone.

When I got spiked, it hit me like a truck straight away. You don't have time to ask the bartender [for help]. I think it's up to the establishments to prevent it.

Participants stated that having discrete ways for women to ask for help if they are feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at licensed venues – such as bathroom stalls saying ‘order this drink if you need help’ – can be helpful if they are supplementing prevention initiatives. However, participants stressed that this alone is not sufficient as it is not preventative.

Services and supports for victim-survivors

Participants expressed the need for access to psychological and therapeutic support, but noted several systemic barriers to accessing this, including:

- Specialist psychological and therapeutic support is inaccessible due to waitlists of six months to two years and the high cost of sessions;
- Generalist psychological and therapeutic support is not always trauma-informed and can lack an understanding of sexual violence, which can lead to retraumatisation;
- Funding for specialist and generalist psychological and therapeutic support is inadequate and systemic barriers make it difficult to obtain.

Furthermore, participants highlighted that adverse experiences with help-seeking can deter victim-survivors from future help-seeking:

I was told 'We might be able to see you in six months. Honestly, maybe you should just go find somewhere private'. – With what money?

'Think positively'. That was the first ever advice I ever got after realising what happened, so that traumatised me. I was like great, so the school psychologist can't help me. Then I got told to go speak to [a specialist sexual assault service] and I said no for ages because I was so scared because the previous psychologist couldn't help me. But then one night I was really struggling [...] so I rang them up [...] explained the whole situation and they said 'I don't think I can help you, you need to go see someone else'.

Participants described that even if psychological support is available, victim-survivors are often deterred from seeking psychological support due to the impacts that receiving therapy may have on outcomes within the criminal justice system:

I didn't receive that therapy because [...] everything had to be fresh to write the statement – and because that statement took so long, I was acutely suicidal for the entire duration.

If [victims] are not as emotional when they're on trial, 'it means they're making it up'. That makes it really difficult because then you could be traumatised and living with triggers and in fear for a lot longer than necessary [...], because you want the court case to go well.

Participants expressed the need for the civil and criminal justice systems to be safe, accessible, victim-centred, and trauma-informed at all stages of engagement, and for victim-survivors to have access to affordable and timely legal support.

Participants highlighted that a systemic barrier which prevents victim-survivors from seeking psychological, therapeutic, and/or justice system-related support is the financial burden help-seeking places on victim-survivors due to:

- The cost of psychological, therapeutic and legal services; and
- Taking time off work to access support; in the context of
- Financial redress being unobtainable.

Participants shared a strong frustration regarding victim-survivors difficulties with accessing the supports they need to assist recovery and a just outcome. Participants described the implications of victim-survivors bearing the financial cost of accessing therapeutic and legal supports, including economic and housing insecurity. Some participants knew victim-survivors that were 'couchsurfing' due to the financial impact of paying for the services that they needed. It was agreed that this also puts women at risk of re-victimisation.

Help is only for the privileged.

Justice is only for people who can afford it.

I had to dip into my savings to pay for my own therapist, which was \$200 and something a session. [...] I was told 'You can be reimbursed for that. The police will pay that back'. And when I tried to get that done, I was told there's this whole form you have to fill out, that's extremely difficult to find. [...] Then I was told that they would have to have full access to all of my – every therapy session I had. [...] Then I was told 'Honestly, you won't get your money for one to two years, so there's no point'.

Participants shared the view that victim-survivors should have timely access to support and redress. Perpetrators should be held accountable, without posing a risk to victim-survivors, by embedding reporting mechanisms and processes into systems which are:

- Safe, accessible, easy-to-navigate, victim-centred, and trauma-informed; and
- Promoted to ensure that people are made aware of the reporting mechanisms and processes available to them, to enable victim-survivors to make informed decisions.



Participants stated that discussion of gender-based violence needs to be destigmatised to break down the barrier of shame that victim-survivors face in help-seeking. In addition to enabling help-seeking, participants said that destigmatisation will enable opportunities for prevention and education to be identified and actioned.

Other findings

Participants described how the socialisation of girls to be submissive and not express anger impacts the way that victim-survivors process and respond to their experiences of victimisation, and argued that that women need to be given the space to be angry:

Since we've been kids, we've been taught 'say sorry', 'okay they've said sorry, now accept their apology'. In my case, I hadn't really recognised what happened, I was very shocked from it. They said 'sorry' and my initial response was 'It's okay, it's fine, don't even stress' like 'I understand, it's okay', just because they said 'sorry'. That straight away made them feel it was okay. And to this day, I think about it every day and they don't even know it happened because I said 'It's okay' because they 'said sorry'.

The same what happened with me, I said 'oh it's okay' because he was going to kill himself, so I had to make sure he was okay.

Instead of me yelling, I sat there and just smiled. I didn't want to make him upset, I didn't want to make him feel bad.

You don't want to make a big deal.

Responses that need to happen is give victim-survivors a space to be angry. Particularly given that the majority of victim-survivors are women, we're socialised to sit still, be pretty, don't be angry, and smile – like absolutely not, I am so furious. 'It's been [years], you shouldn't be angry anymore'. I'm going to be angry for as long as I need to be angry.