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Supporting trans* survivors of sexual violence: learning from users' experiences and perspectives

Executive Summary



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Trans* individuals are particularly vulnerable to violence, including sexual violence and yet many do not access support services. Between June and October 2013 Survivors' Network conducted research into potential barriers to service access by trans* survivors. We collected information through an online questionnaire and through interviews with survivors and professionals who work with them.

This research represents the largest study of its kind in the South-East (42 participants), providing ground-breaking data on trans* people's needs and experiences when accessing services, as well as what, in their opinion, would make for a helpful and appropriate service.

For the purpose of this research, we use the term trans* as an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the gender they were assigned at birth or is outside the gender binary system of male and female (as opposed to cisgender - someone who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth).

Barriers to seeking help

Only **22%** of trans* survivors access statutory or specialist support services following an unwanted sexual experience. Feeling isolated, guilty or ashamed often prevents survivors who identify as trans*, like many other survivors, from seeking help.

Almost all respondents (91%) were worried that their gender identity would affect their experiences of using the service. Specifically:

- 40% did not access services for fear of discrimination by workers or other service users
- 20 % were not aware of services available to them
- 78% were worried they would face repercussions from coming out as trans* while using a service

*"(I was worried) that someone would leak the thing to the press as another "t***** interest" story and I'd have the Scum or Daily Wail camped on my doorstep."*

Interview respondents also expressed concern about services' lack of understanding of how trans* identity and sexual violence can interrelate:

"I didn't want to remember when I was a girl. It's a double violation because it is of a body part that you hate."

Many described mistrust towards services that work with trans* survivors of sexual violence due to negative past experiences of accessing services:

"In (a domestic violence shelter) I was discriminated against by my washing, it was strung outside and when I told the manager... the person was never reprimanded for that. That was a deliberate attempt against me because of my gender."

What would a good service look like?

The participants in our research had many suggestions about how to make a service accessible and useful for trans* survivors. A service that responds to the needs of trans* survivors, would be one that:

- ✓ does not make assumptions about the user's gender

"I get read as a cis woman while identifying as a non-binary femme, and the services I used were "for women" which made me feel alienated and erased."

- ✓ does not out the individual nor pressure them into coming out
- ✓ accepts that gender is a fluid, rather than a binary concept: **83%** would not feel comfortable accessing a service that advertises itself as 'for men' or 'for women'
- ✓ actively challenges transphobia like it would any other forms of discrimination

"If I go to the toilets and get challenged and report it, that the organisation doesn't say to me you better use the accessible toilets."

- ✓ is run by an organisation which is not necessarily trans-led or trans-staffed, but that is actively engaged with LGBTU community: **70%** of survivors said they would feel comfortable accessing a service that worked with the LGBTU community, even if it was not specifically for trans* people

"A lot of trans people have a really good bullshit radar. They know when an organisation is being tokenistic, and when it's being genuinely inclusive." (Catherine Bewley, Sexual Abuse Caseworker Galop)*

- ✓ actively and consistently advertises its services as trans*-inclusive over time
- ✓ offers options of support which are for trans* survivors only: the vast majority of survivors said they would find counselling (96%), a dropin (92%) or a helpline (94%) for trans* survivors useful
- ✓ has a trans* inclusive ethos which is embedded at all levels of the organisation from front-line delivery to strategic planning

"Ensuring ALL employees from a front desk to senior levels are educated in human rights and that an "equal opportunities" policy does not simply "exist" to gloss the image of that organisation but is a constant reminder that should you meet people with a protected characteristic they must be treated with respect and dignity." (Professional)

Conclusions

We hope that the findings of this report will be welcomed by trans* people and enable them to feel that their voices have been heard. We also hope that they will be welcomed by public bodies and other service providers, as evidence of the need to commit resources to further understanding and better including the needs of trans* survivors of sexual violence, ultimately improving the support they receive.

www.survivorsnetwork.org.uk



About Survivors'

Survivors' Network is the rape crisis centre for Sussex. We provide a variety of services to help survivors recover from unwanted sexual experiences.

We provide services that are open to people of any gender including: independent sexual violence advocates, counselling for people 14-18 years old and group work.

We also run a drop-in, helpline and counselling service for self-identifying women.

We are currently looking for funding to expand our Drop-in and Helpline services to offer specialist support for trans* survivors.

Acknowledgements

We thank all the participants (survivors and professionals) for taking part in our research. Without their willingness to share their stories, this research would not have been possible.

I am frightened. Other people like me are frightened. We are human too. We need love. We need support. We need these services. We need your help. Please. (Survivor)