

Raped by a Partner:

a research report by

Women's Health Goulburn North East, supported by

Upper Murray CASA

### **SUSIE REID**

Good morning, my name is Susie Reid I am the /Executive Officer of women's Health Goulburn North east . This morning I feel will be an emotional one for all of us.

Emotional and possibly confronting for a whole lot of reasons. Emotional for the women who are here and who have told their very powerful stories. Emotional for Deb Parkinson our researcher who has worked on this research for over 2 years and for the workers who supported her.

Emotional because it's the end of one journey and the beginning of the next. It was never our intention to leave this piece of research gathering dust on a shelf

And finally emotional for all who are attending today and who will hear real women telling real stories.

On with the speech:

Rape within marriage is no longer private terrain. The intention of this research is to unequivocally state this fact to the men who are raping their partners; to the women who feel they must submit; and to every person in our workforce and community who is complicit in allowing the misconception of 'private terrain' to linger. Rape is a crime. Rape within marriage or an intimate relationship is a crime.

The law is clear:

Sub-section 62(2) of the Crimes Act 1958 states:

'The existence of a marriage does not constitute, or raise any presumption of, consent by a person to an act of sexual penetration with another person or to an indecent assault (with or without aggravating circumstances) by another person. (The Crimes (Amendment) Act 1985 s 10)'

So why did WHGNE do this research?

Our previous research into women leaving violent situations, 'A Powerful Journey', alerted us to the issue of partner rape. When we went looking for existing research, we found a gap in the evidence base, particularly in relation to Aboriginal women and rural women; and to its prevalence. The research we found tended to address domestic violence or sexual abuse generally but not by a partner.

Partner Rape is not recognised as a serious problem. It appears that it's often not even recognised at all. No research can state how many men are convicted for partner rape; and little is known about how workers respond to a women disclosing partner rape. This doesn't mean that it doesn't happen.

One recent book, '*Real Rape, Real Pain: Help for women sexually assaulted by male partners*' gathered stories from 30 women in the US,

England and Australia. It described the problem and pointed to ways women could recover. We gave a copy to each of the women who participated and it was a fantastic way for them to hear that they were not alone in their experience of partner rape.

However, we felt that research was needed to move the focus from the individual woman to the society that allows men to rape their partners – apparently with impunity. Too often, the violent man becomes invisible as we wonder why she doesn't just leave. Well, she stays because of disability, exhaustion, trauma, pregnancy and mothering, complete erosion of confidence and self-autonomy and fear of further violence. But, surely the real question is, 'Why doesn't he stop?'

Why are there so few societal consequences for his illegal actions? Why don't we [as workers and as people] care enough to recognise partner rape as existing and then censure it? Deakin University's Bob Pease writes that, although we may not be **perpetrators** of violence, we are **perpetuators** when we do nothing and say nothing. By pretending it does not exist, we are complicit in partner rape going unnoticed and uncensored.

The aim of this research was to recognise and address partner rape. To do this, we undertook qualitative research which involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with:

- o 21 women
- o 23 health and community sector workers, including 7 working with Aboriginal communities, and
- o 30 police – from uniformed branch, the Criminal Investigation Unit and SOCAU (the sexual offences and child abuse unit)

The location was the Goulburn Valley and north east of Victoria.

Consultations were held in and around Seymour, Shepparton, Wodonga, Benalla, Wangaratta, Myrtleford and Numurkah.

To be involved in the research, the women had to be aged over 18 and to have named their experience as rape. Some responded to local newspaper advertisements and some contacted us, after seeing a flyer at various counselling agencies. Workers were invited by telephone to participate.

And what do we know about the 21 women who told us their stories. Well:

- They came from a range of settings including main rural centres, small towns and farms.
- The age range was between 27 and 70 with a median age of 51.

- Four women were Aboriginal. One woman married an Aboriginal man and lived in his community for 11 years; two women migrated to Australia in their early 20s.
- For five women, the rapes were recent with two cases before the courts. For the other 16 women, the rapes took place more than 5 years ago – but were still raw in their impact.

Ethics approval was gained from:

- The Centre's Research Ethics Committee, registered with the National Health and Medical Research Council, and
- The Victoria Police Research Coordinating Committee.

We believe this research has the great potential to raise awareness – amongst all of us – of the experience of rape within relationships, drawn from the lived experience of women in rural and remote communities, and to offer recommendations for improved service provision from health and community services.

We are privileged here today to have some of the women who participated in this research. Five women will speak, and others are audience members.

But first, I would like to introduce Marie, who is a La Trobe University student, and student-teacher at *Sharyn Hill School for Speech and Drama* in Albury. Marie picked up the partner rape postcard at uni, and found the words she read deeply moved her. She was inspired to interpret the issue dramatically to reach people in a different way.