

Why **Partner Rape** is so Invisible ...and why women don't report

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Raped by a Partner: a research report is the result of a collaboration between Women's Health Goulburn North East and Upper Murray Centre Against Sexual Assault. It is based on information generously offered by women in the Goulburn Valley and north east Victoria. Author of the report, Debra Parkinson, has written the following article about the research findings. The report is available for download from www.whealth.com.au

Since 1985, it has been illegal for a man to rape his wife, yet partner rape is still not seen as a serious problem. It has been identified as the most prevalent form of sexual assault, and yet the most neglected (Morrison, 2008). We do not know its prevalence or how many cases are reported to police, how many of these cases get to court, how many men are found guilty, or the sentences given.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2005 Personal Safety Survey reported 0.4% of women experienced rape by a current partner (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005), yet nine years earlier, the Women's Safety Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996) reported that 10% of women ever in a relationship disclosed an incident of sexual violence in a previous relationship – a much more credible figure.

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that 0.4% is a gross understatement¹. Other statistics show high rates of violence against women, for example the International Violence Against Women Survey (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004) found that:

- 57% Australian women experience physical violence in their lifetime, and
- 34% experience sexual violence.

In the face of figures such as these, it is indeed incredible to think that only 0.4% of

women would experience partner rape in a lifetime. There is such shame surrounding rape, and this is exacerbated in partner rape. The ABS (2005) estimated that only 19% of ALL sexual assaults were reported in 2005. How many fewer would report their own husband - and the father of their children - to police as a rapist?

A recently published research report, *Raped by a Partner*, was based on consultations with 21 women, 23 health professionals and 30 police officers from the north east of Victoria and the Goulburn Valley. The main reasons suggested by police for women not reporting are: fear of not being believed; misconception that there is no 'rape' in marriage; self blame; concern for children; the hardship in establishing a new home and a new life; and fear of escalating violence.

Too often we ask 'Why doesn't she just leave?' She stays because of trauma, exhaustion, pregnancy and mothering, disability, complete erosion of confidence and self-autonomy and fear of further violence. But surely the real question is, 'Why doesn't he stop?'

Perhaps the most startling thing we learned from every woman in this research is that they believe their partner would not have recognised his actions as rape – even when she would be crying and he would not stop, even when he accompanied the rape with violence and even when the violence was extreme.

¹ It is interesting to note, though, that this figure is 15 times the rate of the road toll in Australia - and we care about the road toll!

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What kind of man does this? It seems they are mostly men who are considered 'good citizens and great blokes'. They apparently don't see their violent actions as rape because they feel entitled. They see women as their property and sex as their right: 'She's mine'; 'I married her'; 'I work hard'. One man shook the marriage certificate in front of his wife's face and said, 'This says I can do what I want with you'.

A notable finding of this research is that only six of the 30 police officers consulted said they would advise someone they loved to report partner rape, despite 28 of the 30 calling it a serious crime. Their reasons were the difficulty in proving it; the lengthy delays in getting to court; and the damaging and disrespectful treatment of women once there.

A sentence handed down recently in the Wodonga Magistrates' Court confirms their fears (Cooke, 2008). After pleading guilty, a man of means who drugged and sexually assaulted his wife was given a fine of \$2500 and a good behaviour bond of 12 months. No conviction was recorded against him.

This research report asserts that our society is complicit in partner rape being unrecognised and unnamed. Church leaders, doctors, police, neighbours, and family members all played a role in silencing women who spoke up. This recent sentence is further evidence of society's complicity at the highest levels.

Why don't we (as workers and as people) care enough to recognise partner rape and to 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 (Pease, 2006). By pretending it does not exist, we too are complicit in partner rape going unnoticed and uncensored.

References

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You can help in just four steps

ASK: Are you safe within your relationship?

NAME IT: What you've just described to me is rape and it's a crime.

RESPOND: Give contact details of the local CASA (1800 806 292), DV Service (1800 015 188) and Victoria Police SOCA Unit (000 – Ask for the SOCA unit).

FOLLOW UP: Last time you spoke about your safety. I'd like to know how you are now.