

BOYS DON'T



BILLIE ANDREWS ASKS WHY MEN DON'T IDENTIFY AS SEXUAL ABUSE SURVIVORS

During my eight years of working in the substance misuse field, I worked with a number of adult survivors and found, through my own experience, that women seem to be more comfortable identifying themselves as survivors of childhood sexual abuse. A number of men I worked with struggled to make this connection; for some, I was the first person they confided in about the abuse they suffered as a child, yet they were still reluctant to contact support services to make sense of their experience. This is when I started to make links with the charity Survivors Manchester¹, a male-specific service that works with victims of sexual abuse and violence. I knew immediately this was where I wanted to be, and so I started my journey to becoming a counsellor.

I decided to look at why I find myself drawn to this subject matter and to look at whether sexual violence against men is an issue. In this article, I have chosen to focus on two of the main issues I have come across in my research: perceived masculinity within a patriarchal society; and questions abuse raises for survivors around their sexuality.

A FEMINIST VIEW

I learned early on that I was a feminist – something of a revelation for me, although perhaps less so for those around me. It's not a label I like; I see my family rolling their eyes as I begin on 'yet another rant about the injustices of society'. Once I accepted this label, I started to think that maybe I shouldn't be aiming to work with male survivors but instead look towards female services; but no, something didn't quite fit there. So why, as a feminist, do I find myself

fighting the corner of men who have been silenced? We live in a patriarchal society – masculinity dominates and the characteristics that go with it are revered. Being aggressive, tough, competitive and potent are all characteristics we are taught to aspire to; while being emotional, frail and needy – feminine – is something to be avoided. When I think about myself, I probably have more typically masculine traits than I do feminine. I was somewhat of a tomboy growing up – I enjoyed climbing trees and playing football, and I remember spending hours with my dad, learning how to fight and watching him play various sports. I was even given a boy's name! There was a big emphasis on being strong and tough in my family – we were taught to get on with it.

It is perhaps the personal connections that I have made through writing this article that have surprised me most. I thought, rather naively, that I was passionate about providing a service where there is a lack of services and fighting for the underdog, but I realise now that it's about much more than that: I want to give people a voice who have never had a voice; I want to give people the space to experience their pain who have never had that space before; I want to give people permission to be vulnerable because I have never felt able to be vulnerable.

MALE RAPE

So is male rape really an issue? Certainly, when I have told people what I am studying, I have had a few doubting looks and some questions asking whether it really happens. As a society, we really do struggle to see men as victims. From my own experience as a child, I remember being talked to about the risks of sexual violence and the potential of being a victim, yet when I asked my partner, he doesn't remember this ever being a threat to him. The word 'victim' has connotations of being weak, vulnerable and an easy target, all of which can be

considered more feminine traits. We struggle to see men as victims, and so when men are targeted, they have no frame of reference to think of themselves in this way. The abuser silences their victims; society perpetuates this silence.

It is estimated that one in five women will be a victim of sexual violence from the age of 16² while estimates for men being a victim of sexual violence range from one in six³ to three in 20⁴. Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis and Smith⁵ estimate that 16 per cent of males have experienced some form of sexual violence throughout their lives. We need to be careful using statistics; they show what we know, but we only know what we know – our unknown is infinite. We also know that men are much less likely to disclose^{6,7}, or even to identify themselves as victims, so in reality, these figures are likely to be much higher.

There are 78 charities and organisations that offer support to female victims in the UK; there are just five organisations offering support to men. In 2013, the Ministry of Justice announced that it was providing £4 million per year over the next three years to organisations that provide direct support to victims of historic or recent sexual violence⁸. Initially the five male-focused charities were excluded from applying for funding – the first Rape Support Fund was dedicated to services that purely supported women and girls over the age of 13. However, this has now been, in part, addressed by the news that the Government has set aside £500,000 to fund advice, support and counselling for male victims of rape and sexual violence this year⁹. The new fund is open to bids from charities and support organisations that feel they can offer help specifically to male victims and will fund support for men who have been assaulted in the past and were under 13 at the time of the attack.

BEING A MAN

I would ask the reader to consider what it is to be a man and what maleness represents for them. We often see men as resilient and self-sufficient, emotionally closed, and highly sexed: men are in charge and display controlling behaviour; men are strong, unemotional and dominant¹⁰. Whereas women are gentle, passive and emotional¹¹. We teach our children that boys don't cry, that it is a weakness to show vulnerability, helplessness or pain. Even the way, as parents, that we comfort our children can be different for boys and girls. If a girl cries, she is likely to be offered comfort and warmth; if a boy cries, he may be mocked or told to be a 'big boy'. Some parents cuddle their sons less for fear of making them soft or a 'sissy'¹². Feelings such as anger are often encouraged as these are seen as more masculine

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emotions, and so boys learn from an early age that this is a safe way to express themselves. Rogers and Terry¹³ found that men can have an internal need to control and dominate others around them. Men can have difficulty expressing and, at times, even identifying feelings¹⁴.

Men seeking, or rather not seeking help, is not unique to sexual violence; we know men are underrepresented in GP waiting rooms across the country. If we look at most health promotion literature, women are the target audience. Men are much less likely to seek medical attention, highlighted in the fact that men have a 50 per cent higher death rate for melanoma, despite there being a 50 per cent lower prevalence rate of the disease in men¹⁵. Male suicide rates are three to five times higher for men than women, with rates amongst men being the highest they have been since 2002¹⁶.

MEN AND PATRIARCHY

Patriarchal society can be traced back thousands of years to the cavemen – men were the hunter-gatherers and, to be successful at this, a man needed to be strong. It is seen in the animal kingdom – the strong dominant male is the most successful and goes on to produce the most offspring. A man's physical strength can again make it difficult to view men as victims – surely their physical power will be enough to fight off any potential attack? But this view continues to silence men – we know that abusers often do not need to use physical strength. Rarely does sexual abuse stand alone – emotional and mental abuse is usually lurking somewhere behind the scenes; abusers use coercion and manipulation and victims can often see themselves as complicit in their own sexual abuse. To be penetrated is to be treated like a woman; it is emasculation in its true sense of the word.

This inherent masculinity can make it difficult for men and boys to speak out. Patriarchy isolates boys and men¹⁷ and it is the perception of masculinity that silences males further¹⁰. Males can internalise the abuse they have suffered and, as do many victims of sexual abuse, they assume responsibility for what has happened to them. Survivors will often perceive that they are weak and frail because they 'let it happen'. Men will often report that they feel less of a man as a result of the abuse and so choose to stay quiet so others do not know of this perceived weakness. Some survivors will align themselves with their perpetrator and take on controlling and dominant characteristics. They may seek to control others around them and behave in an aggressive and violent manner.

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Male victims can display much more problematic behaviours than their female counterparts, such as substance misuse, aggression, criminality and suicide attempts¹⁸. It is not surprising that survivors often come into contact with the Criminal Justice System rather than support services in the community. With this in mind, it is vital that services start working alongside prisons and the probation service to ensure victims get the support they need in order to become survivors.

Our laws attribute blame to 'the receiver' as far back as AD 342, when Emperor Constantine declared that the sentence for passive homosexuality would be the death penalty by burning alive. Male rape only appeared in statute in 1995 and so we are only just beginning to recognise this as an issue. Homosexuality was only removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1980. As a society, we have struggled to understand sex between two males and have continued to stigmatise.

VIOLENCE AND SEXUALITY

While reading around this subject matter, the issue of sexuality kept reappearing. Women and girls who are victims of sexual violence often view themselves as 'damaged goods' and identify more with shame and humiliation, while male victims are much more likely to have issues around their sexuality, and experience anger and rage^{19,20}. Being sexually abused as a boy or man can lead to persistent concern with regards to one's sexuality²¹. Etherington⁶ found that some parents were relieved when they found out their child was 'just a victim of sexual abuse rather than him being gay'.

Boys and men who are abused will often experience an erection or ejaculation; this can lead to feelings of involvement and responsibility. Some survivors may feel that they somehow attracted their abuser and that this was something internal to them; for example, an effeminate look, displaying signs of vulnerability, or being perceived as easy prey. It also raises questions for the victim as he may not perceive his experience as negative – if he was aroused, he may feel that there was a sense of enjoyment there. This can lead to questions around sexuality. It is important to recognise that ejaculation is not the same as orgasm, and that arousal is not the same as enjoyment – you can have one without the other²².

PATTERNS OF ABUSE?

There is also the myth that is known as 'Vampire Syndrome', which is the belief that those who are abused will go on to abuse. There is a fear for survivors that they will be perceived as potential sex offenders, and so it is no wonder that people choose to stay quiet rather than face further stigma. Research by Groth and Hobson²³ found that survivors do not go on to become offenders. We need to stop viewing survivors as potential offenders; 'If we give men permission to come forward as victims, we will see a reduction in those presenting who have not gone on to act out sexual violence'²⁴.

Finally, I would like to consider how our 'Britishness' contributes towards the silence of sexual abuse. We're prudish as a nation and we don't like to talk about sex, but actually, that is what we need to be doing. We teach our children that sex is shameful and to talk about it is to be corrupt²⁵ but we need to be talking about sex and sexual abuse so we can facilitate disclosures²⁶. We need to teach children what is safe and what is not safe and help them develop healthy boundaries with adults; we need to hand over control to our children. In doing this, we give children a frame of reference to talk about their experiences. Many survivors of sexual abuse state that they simply did not have the language to report what was happening to them. Getting it on the agenda does not instil fear into our children, it protects them and it gives them the confidence to speak out when something is wrong. We need to break the silence – men and boys are victims too.

CONCLUSION

To return to feminism and my being a feminist, there is no doubt feminism massively helped women to be heard and put sexual abuse on the agenda. However, men are also victims of patriarchal society – we often ignore their emotions and encourage them to 'take it like a man'.

We need to stop seeing men as having all the power and as being the aggressors in asserting control. Boys should be encouraged to express their feelings and their experiences in much the same way as girls are encouraged. Men can experience shame and internalise this as blaming themselves; we need to give men the space to be acknowledged as potential victims so they are able to hand over responsibility to perpetrators.

We need to stop viewing vulnerability as a weakness and instead view it as something to aspire to, for it is only in being truly vulnerable that we allow ourselves to be truly seen²⁷. ■

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READER RESPONSE

The author welcomes feedback on this article. To contact Billie, please email hcpj.editorial@baep.co.uk