



# We Are Survivors!

Support for survivors of sexual violence  
In conflict



# CONTENTS

---

Foreword: Arriving in Australia

---

Content Warning and a Note on Terminology

---

Other Guides in the We Are Survivors! series

---

A Message of Hope from a Fellow Survivor

---

## INTRODUCTION

### SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS AND RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

---

What is “rape as a weapon of war”?

---

How common is sexual violence as a weapon of war?

---

Who are the victims of sexual violence in conflict situations?

---

How many refugees and asylum seekers are victims of sexual violence a form of warfare?

---

How many refugees and asylum seekers are victims of sexual violence a form of warfare?

---

What about sexual violence in refugee camps and detention centres?

---

What are the effects of rape when used as a weapon of war?

---

What are the effects of rape used as a weapon of war on families?

---

What barriers do victims/survivors of sexual violence in conflict experience?

---

What are the laws regarding sexual violence as a form of warfare?

---

Does Australia have any domestic laws that address the crime of rape and other forms of sexual violence as a weapon of war?

---

What are the legal processes in cases of sexual violence as a weapon of war?

---

Can victims/survivors make a report if the crime happened in another country?

---

What can help victims/survivors of sexual violence as a weapon of war or torture?

---

### HELPFUL INFORMATION ESPECIALLY FOR SURVIVORS

---

Common reactions to trauma and the effects of sexual violence

---

Some common reactions to trauma

---

Effects of sexual violence used as a weapon of war and/or torture

---

Post Traumatic Stress (PTS)

---

Complex Post Traumatic Stress (C-PTS)

---

Long term physical/health consequences

---

Sexuality and intimacy

---

“Was it my fault?”

---

“Why do I feel ashamed about what has happened to me?”

---

“What if I am still being affected by the crime?”

---

## WHO CAN HELP ME?

---

Getting help

---

What can help?

---

Building a healthy sexual relationship

---

Can counselling help?

## REPORTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE TO THE AUTHORITIES

---

Can I make a report if the crime happened in another country?

---

How do I make a report and who do I report to if the crime happened in Australia?

---

Barriers to reporting sexual assault facing survivors from refugee, asylum-seeking and temporary visa holding backgrounds

---

What are the legal processes?

---

Survivors have rights

## INFORMATION FOR LOVED ONES, FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS AND OTHER SUPPORTERS

---

What can help survivors of sexual violence?

---

How can I help and support a victim of rape as a weapon of war?

---

How can a victim/survivor of rape as a weapon of war heal from the experience?

---

Hope, healing and recovery are possible!

## WHAT SUPPORT SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE IN NSW / AUSTRALIA?

---

Some resources that can help

---

Some useful websites

# FOREWORD

## ARRIVING IN AUSTRALIA

Welcome to Australia! First of all, congratulations on making it to Australia as that is an amazing achievement. While everybody's journey is different, there are some challenges that you may have faced, and may still be facing, when coming here.

If you are an asylum seeker and arrived here by boat, you may have been subject to mandatory detention while your refugee claim was processed. The experience of detention may have been a stressful, difficult, even traumatising one for you. The prolonged processing times may have added to the stress and uncertainty. Navigating the complex legal processes for seeking asylum or refugee status can be extremely daunting. Understanding and completing the required paperwork, showing up to the necessary hearings and ensuring you don't miss essential deadlines can be overwhelming for those new to this country and unfamiliar with the Australian legal system (navigating the court and legal system can be difficult even for some Australians).

Other challenges you may have faced include trying to gain access to essential services, particularly healthcare, education and gaining employment. If you don't speak English or find understanding English challenging, it is easy to become frustrated and despondent. Difficulties understanding the culture and being unfamiliar with the local systems can exacerbate what is already a challenging time. It can be difficult for anybody to establish connections and find new friends let alone finding yourself in a new country and trying to establish a community and social network. If you are struggling with any trauma you experienced in your home country as a result of conflict or war, settling into Australia can almost seem impossible. This may be especially true if you have been separated from your family, either through the journey to get here or by all of the government processes. Sadly, you may have also had to face discrimination, racism, and xenophobia from some segments of the population. However, please be aware that this is not representative of the true spirit of this nation.

In addition to all of this, you may be dealing with the trauma of having experienced sexual violence, either during your country of origin's war or during any stage of your journey to Australia. There are certainly a lot of issues you are contending with, but this resource has been produced to help in your first steps towards healing from sexual assault. Overcoming the trauma of sexual violence, as well as recovery and healing, *are* possible. It is hoped that this resource will help you take the first steps in this, another, life-changing journey of hope.

*We commend you for your bravery, strength and resilience!*

## CONTENT WARNING

The content addressed in this Guide and other *We Are Survivors!* Guides addresses the topic of sexual violence and may be emotionally distressing and/or triggering to readers. It is recommended that all readers prepare emotionally beforehand.

If you are a survivor of sexual violence you may choose to read this Guide with the support of a trusted support person and/or professional.

If you have been a victim of sexual assault or rape, please allow this Guide to speak directly to you. If you need to take a break from reading this Guide, please feel free to put it down and pick it up at a later time when you are ready again to start reading.

If you would like additional support, a list of support services is provided at the end of this Guide.

## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The terms “sexual assault”, “sexual abuse”, “sexual violence”, “sexual exploitation” and “sexual crime” all refer to criminal behaviour that is sexual in nature and the terms are used interchangeably through this series of Guides. Similarly, the terms “victim” and “survivor” are used interchangeably in this Guide (and all Guides in this series) in recognition that sexual assault including sexual exploitation is a victimising crime (i.e., there is a “victim” of the crime) and that those who survive the crime are indeed “survivors” just to have survived. The term victim is also used to honour those who unfortunately did not survive the crime and are no longer with us as a result.

The *We Are Survivors!* Guides have been developed to help and support everyone from all backgrounds and circumstances in their survivor journey.

## OTHER GUIDES IN THE WE ARE SURVIVORS! SERIES

Other Guides in the We Are Survivors! Series include

*We Are Survivors: Support for Adult Survivors of Sexual Violence from CALD, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds*

*We Are Survivors: Support for Young People Who Have Experienced Sexual Violence from CALD, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds*

*We Are Survivors: Support for LGBTIQ+ Survivors of Sexual Violence from CALD, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds*

*We Are Survivors: Support for Female Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse from CALD, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds*

*We Are Survivors: Support for Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse from CALD, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds*

*We Are Survivors: Support for Parents and Carers of Children from CALD, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds Who Have Been Sexually Abused*

*We Are Survivors: Support for Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation from CALD, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds*

*We Are Survivors: A Guide for Professionals Supporting Survivors of Sexual Violence from CALD, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds*

Go to [www.wearesurvivors.online](http://www.wearesurvivors.online) for more information and resources.

# A MESSAGE OF HOPE FROM A FELLOW SURVIVOR

*“There are a lot of problems in my head. They are still in my head and that is a problem for me but I have the feeling that I want to live.”*

Survivor from the MANTRA survivor group by NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS).

*MANTRA\* is an acronym for ‘MAN Torture and Rape’, was developed to assist Tamil survivors of sexual torture seeking asylum in Australia. Mantra acknowledges the power of self-talk and thought and is also a Sanskrit word that translates as ‘instrument of the mind’ (MAN= mind, TRA= instrument).*

Fernades, P and Aiello, Y (2018). Breaking the silence through MANTRA: Empowering Tamil MAN survivors of torture and rape. Journal on Rehabilitation of Torture Victims and Torture Prevention, vol 3, pp. 14 – 29

# INTRODUCTION

When rape is used as a weapon of war it has potentially devastating effects for everyone impacted by it, from the individual victim, to families, and to whole communities. Rape and sexual assault used as a weapon of war occurs in conflicts all over the world, in all cultures, religions and in all types of families. Sexual violence can also occur in refugee camps and detention centres which can have equally devastating effects on the victim, their loved ones and those around them. People of all genders and ages are vulnerable to sexual violence.

While sexual violence is a problem all over the world, it is not often talked about openly. However, the effects of sexual assault, no matter where it occurs, including within refugee camps, detention centres and/or when used as a weapon in conflict or war, need to be addressed. The silence around these forms of violence can contribute to feelings of isolation of survivors and can exacerbate the potentially devastating effects of these crimes. The effects can be compounded even further when the survivor has also experienced other forms of trauma in their country of origin, including facing the significant issues of migration or the seeking of asylum in Australia.

It is imperative that the perpetration of sexual violence committed in conflict situations, in refugee camps and in detention centres is discussed openly in order for the victims of these crimes to receive the life-changing help and support they deserve.

*If you are a survivor of sexual violence and come from a migrant, refugee or asylum-seeking background, it is hoped that the material in this Guide will assist you to begin healing and to find support. It is hoped that by obtaining information and reading about the experiences of others, you will know that you are not alone. After experiencing sexual assault, support is available, and healing is possible.*

*If you are a loved one, family member, friend, supporter or professional who is assisting the survivor of sexual violence committed as a weapon of war or in a refugee camp or detention centre, it is hoped that this Guide will provide you with the information you need to better support the survivor and help the survivor to obtain all the help and support they need and deserve.*



# SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS AND RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

*“... in many cultures whenever there is war the second weapon is sexual assault. It is established and true that in Sri Lanka it is abundant.” (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)*

## What is “rape as a weapon of war”?

The term “rape as a weapon of war” describes the intentional and organised use of sexual violence, including rape, as a tactic in armed confrontations or war. Specifically, sexual violence is used as a tactical instrument to further military, political, or social goals rather than being only a regrettable result of the conflict. State actors, rebel organisations, or other armed entities may be the perpetrators.

The deliberate use of sexual assault against civilian populations or opposing forces is intended to intimidate, demoralize, and exert control over them. It seeks to disrupt social systems by creating terror amongst the population. This form of sexual violence is a planned and coordinated tactic rather than a single, isolated or random occurrence. Large-scale sexual exploitation, including mass rape and sexual slavery, may also be perpetrated by the offenders of these crimes.

When rape is used as a weapon of war, the civilian population is deliberately targeted. The main victims are women and children, but men may also be victimised. Male victims of sexual violence in conflict situations may find it especially difficult to talk about due to culture beliefs and attitudes around masculinity and identity. These crimes can happen in the event of an occupation, an armed invasion, or in other conflict-related circumstances.

Sexual violence including rape is used as a tool to humiliate and subjugate individuals as well as whole communities. For survivors and their communities, the crimes may have long-lasting physical, psychological, and social repercussions. By causing enduring trauma and ingrained resentment, sexual violence can lead to the continuation of conflict. It may also impede attempts at healing and reconciliation following the conflict. The devastating effects of this specific type of war-crime can last for generations.

Human rights legislation, international humanitarian law, and other agreements are all flagrantly violated when rape is used as a weapon of war. Such violence is a *crime against humanity* as well as a *war-crime*.

The aim of the *We Are Survivors!* resources is to provide survivors of these atrocities, their loved ones and the professionals who seek to help them, with information and support so that they can begin their healing journey. It is hoped the resources will also serve to increase community awareness and mobilise action to finally put an end to the inhumanity of sexual violence as a weapon of war.

## How common is sexual violence as a weapon of war?

Because sexual violence is a sensitive topic and because entering combat zones can be extremely challenging, it is difficult to adequately determine the true extent of these crimes. However, there are countless historical and modern wars when sexual violence has been documented as having been employed as a planned tactic (for example

documentation by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other humanitarian organisations). Numerous reports show that rape has frequently been used as a weapon of war in battles throughout several continents, including Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (e.g., Fernandes and Aiello, 2018).

### **Barriers to Obtaining Information**

Obtaining accurate statistics is made even more difficult by the under-reporting of the crime. Many survivors may be unwilling to come forward because they don't trust the judicial system, are afraid of the stigma associated with sexual crimes, or fear retaliation. The true number of cases are therefore more likely to be much higher than those that have been recorded officially. Sadly, crimes committed in conflict situations are frequently committed without repercussions, which feeds the culture of impunity amongst offenders. This absence of accountability and justice undoubtedly makes reporting even less likely for victims. An additional factor contributing to the difficulty in obtaining accurate statistics on these crimes is the overall difficulty researchers and humanitarian organisations have in accessing war-impacted areas to accurately collect data and document cases.

Despite these obstacles, the issue of sexual violence as a weapon of war and torture has received more attention globally in recent times, which has raised activism and awareness within the global community. Governments, non-government organisations, and international organisations are all attempting to stop sexual assault from being used as a weapon of war. Legal actions, programs for the assistance of survivors, and campaigns to hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes are all part of this effort. While significant progress has been made, the eradication of sexual violence as a weapon of war remains a difficult, complex and ongoing challenge worldwide.

### **Who are the victims of sexual violence in conflict situations?**

Sexual violence committed in conflict situations frequently affects civilians and its effects go beyond those of the immediate survivors. Sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls is commonly used as a form of warfare, and women and girls are disproportionately the targets of such warfare. Women and girls in conflict environments are especially vulnerable to forced prostitution, rape, sexual slavery, and other types of violence based on their gender. Although less often documented, men and boys are also susceptible to sexual assault during wars, including rape, sexual torture, and other forms of sexual abuse. However, males may find it more difficult to disclose if they have been subjected to sexual crimes due to the cultural stigma often associated with sexual violence, particularly against males.

### **Children and other especially vulnerable groups**

Children are likewise impacted by conflict-related sexual violence, both as direct victims and as witnesses to the atrocities. It is possible for children to be sexually abused, exploited, or kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery in conflicts. In addition, as a result of persecution and discrimination regarding their gender identity or sexual orientation, members of the LGBTIQ+ community may be particularly targeted for sexual violence during conflict situations. Survivors who identify as LGBTIQ+ may also be highly reluctant to report the crimes due to fear of discrimination and/or further persecution. The elderly are also not immune to this form of warfare either, and they may be targeted as a kind of torture or humiliation.

### **The impact on whole communities**

Sexual violence affects entire communities in addition to its individual victims and their loved ones. In addition to contributing to displacement and the destruction of social institutions, sexual violence used as a form of warfare

serves to undermine and destroy community cohesion. Furthermore, children who are born as a consequence of rape used as a weapon of war may experience discrimination and stigma within the community; and these children often face difficulties with acceptance in society and can face significant challenges with their identity. The effects of sexual violence used as a form of warfare can endure for generations.

Sexual violence utilised as a form of warfare is not confined to any particular geographical area or cultural setting. Victims come from a variety of backgrounds and might be associated with various social, religious, or ethnic groups. Supporting all victims of these crimes, holding offenders accountable, and putting policies in place to stop such atrocities during conflicts are essential in our efforts to confront and end the use of sexual assault as a weapon of war.

### **How many refugees and asylum seekers are victims of sexual violence a form of warfare?**

It is impossible to determine the exact number of refugees and asylum seekers who have been the victims of sexual violence in conflict due to a number of factors, including the under-reporting of the crime, the sensitivity of the topic, and the difficulty of obtaining reliable data in areas of conflict. Sexual assault is frequently underreported under normal circumstances, and survivors—particularly those who are seeking shelter or asylum—may encounter extra obstacles before coming forward.

A significant number of refugees and asylum seekers flee war-torn areas, and they may have observed and/or experienced sexual abuse while in transit. Support and protection for refugees and asylum-seekers, especially those who have experienced sexual violence, are provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organisations.

While exact figures may be difficult to determine, numerous publications have brought attention to the high rate of sexual violence against communities that have been internally displaced. The precise figures may differ according to the particular conflict, the area, and the data that is available. Aside from rape, refugees and asylum seekers may encounter other forms of gender-based violence including forced marriage, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking.

*See the [We Are Survivors! Support for Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation](#) for more information specifically on this issue.*

It is imperative that all survivors of sexual violence are provided with medical and psychological support, legal aid, and safety in refugee camps and detention centres, and in their host communities.

### **What about sexual violence in refugee camps and detention centres?**

Sadly, sexual assault and other forms of gender-based violence also happens in refugee camps and detention centres. People in refugee camps and detention centres are especially vulnerable to sexual assault for several reasons, including displacement and instability, over-crowded living conditions and limited access to resources. Vulnerability to all forms of violence, including sexual violence, is increased when individuals are uprooted from their homes and communities and lose recognisable social networks.

## Increased risk

These risks can be increased by unstable living conditions and dense populations living in packed conditions with limited privacy, particularly in camps. Refugee camps and detention centres are often excessively crowded, have a lack of privacy, and often provide insufficient security measures, all of which can contribute to an increased risk of sexual violence. In addition, a lack of food, water, and shelter may lead to rivalry and conflict, again increasing the propensity for sexual abuse and exploitation to be committed.

Environmental conditions in refugee camps and/or detention centres, such as inadequate security and lighting, may increase the risk of sexual violence. The disintegration of customary social structures and community standards as a consequence of displacement can also contribute to an environment in which perpetrators take advantage of the vulnerability of others. Inadequate law enforcement and legal systems may lead to a lack of accountability for offenders, further fostering an atmosphere in which sexual assault may be perpetrated with impunity. In addition to environmental conditions which increase the risk of sexual assault, it is extremely challenging for survivors to obtain aid in refugee camps and detention centres due to limited access to psychosocial, legal, and medical support services.

*However, if you or someone you know is a survivor of sexual assault in Australia, including sexual violence that occurred in a refugee camp or detention centre, there are support services and resources available to help. Please refer to the end of this Guide for helpful suggestions for organisations and agencies that can provide support.*

## What are the effects of rape when used as a weapon of war?

***“... wherever we go all the tortures are in our past. On Sundays I catch the train and the thoughts come back. I don’t have enough strength to control my mind. Even while sitting here I am thinking of the torture.”*** (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)

### Effects on the individual survivor

Rape as a form of warfare can leave survivors with serious, long-lasting psychological, emotional and physical consequences. Physically, victims and survivors may experience internal injuries, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unintended pregnancies, amongst other effects. Adoption, abortion, and parenting of a child conceived under such circumstances can be difficult and problems may be exacerbated if reproductive health care is inaccessible to the survivor.

Long-term care and medical treatment may be necessary due to the physical stress caused as a result of the assault. Psychologically and emotionally, survivors may develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTS), anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. The psychological and emotional scars may still be present long after the physical wounds have healed (Fernandes & Aiello, 2018).

Survivors of sexual assault in conflict may experience rejection, shame, and social stigmatisation resulting in isolation and difficulties reintegrating into their communities. Education, work, and social connections may all be negatively impacted for survivors. The capacity to function normally in life and to actively participate in their communities may be severely hampered by the trauma (Fernandes & Aiello, 2018).

## Generational consequences

Rape used as a weapon of war can also have a profound effect on future generations. For example, the children born as a consequence of rape in war may experience discrimination and stigma, with the trauma having a significant impact on their mental health and perpetuating the consequences of the crime into the next generation.

Furthermore, the fear of reprisals, a lack of legal options and protections, and/or inadequate legal systems can make it even more difficult for survivors to pursue justice. When perpetrators escape justice, and are seen to escape justice, the cycle of impunity continues. The demoralisation and disintegration of social structures within communities can, and often does, lead to long-term social instability and unrest.

### What are the effects of rape used as a weapon of war on families?

Rape as a form of warfare has devastating and complex ramifications for families, affecting not just the immediate victim but also the entire system of relationships within the family. As victims and their loved ones attempt to deal with the emotional and physical consequences of the trauma, the sexual assault can cause a disintegration of the family dynamics. The psychological trauma experienced by the victim can also affect family members who may have witnessed the assault or heard about it. Depression, anxiety, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues may arise for numerous members of the family.

Families may also experience social stigma and isolation in their communities as a result of the perceived shame of the sexual violence. Families may also experience financial hardship as a direct or indirect consequence of the assault. The survivors' ability to pursue further education or work opportunities may be significantly impeded, which can also negatively impact their family's financial stability. Displacement may further exacerbate the economic hardship. The loss of homes, jobs, and social support systems resulting from the displacement can make it even more difficult for a family to recover.

### The effects on children

If any children in the family witnessed the sexual assault it can result in severe emotional distress and even developmental consequences for the child/children. Survivors who are parents may experience significant parenting issues after the assault and family dynamics, including caregiving practices, may be severely impacted by the effects of the assault on the survivor's mental health. In addition, children born as a result of the sexual assault may experience discrimination and stigma, resulting in long lasting effects on the next generation.

*If you or someone you know is a survivor of sexual assault in conflict or war, in a refugee camp or in a detention centre, there are support services and resources available to help. Please refer to the end of this Guide for helpful suggestions for organisations and agencies that can provide support.*

### What barriers do victims/survivors of sexual violence in conflict experience?

*"If it becomes known (that I was raped) then I would need to suicide as I can't face society." (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)*

There are many obstacles that can make it extremely difficult for victims/survivors of sexual violence in conflict situations to report the crime, obtain support, and pursue justice. These can include:

## **Shame and Stigma**

Survivors of the sexual assault may be afraid of the shame and stigma that society will attach to them. It is common in many cultures to place blame on the victim rather than the offender, which deters survivors from coming forward. This phenomenon can occur in environments where the sexual assault has been perpetrated in conflict zones as well as non-conflict related environments.

## **Fear of Retaliation**

Survivors may be afraid of potential retaliation from the perpetrators against themselves or against those close to them if they report the crime. When sexual violence is committed by armed groups or military personnel, this fear may be intensified, due to the actual or perceived lawlessness and atmosphere of legal impunity.

## **Lack of Trust in Authorities**

Survivors may be reluctant to report crimes in conflict zones due to a lack of trust in the local government or the legal system. This mistrust may result from instances of official complicity in the conflict, a lack of accountability, and/or corruption within the government and/or its institutions.

## **Inadequate Legal Systems**

Inadequate or even non-existent legal systems may not be able to protect survivors, witnesses or hold perpetrators accountable. This can be a significant factor in creating a culture of impunity which tolerates sexual assault without consequence.

## **Limited Access to Justice or Support Services**

Language challenges and a lack of access to affordable legal support are just a few of the barriers that survivors may encounter when trying to access formal judicial systems. Furthermore, in many conflict-affected locations, survivors may not have easy access to adequate support services, such as safe spaces, counselling, and even medical attention.

## **Displacement**

Displaced populations, including refugees and internally displaced people, may encounter more difficulties getting the support they need as a result of disrupted social systems, the scarcity or complete lack of support services and resources, as well as the absence of familiar social and community networks.

## **Discrimination Based on Gender**

A culture of silence on sexual violence is sustained by social attitudes that discriminate against females and blame the victims rather than the perpetrators. Women and girls may find it especially difficult to seek and obtain justice or assistance due to discrimination based on gender and the resulting unequal power relations.

## **Lack of Awareness**

Many survivors of rape as a weapon of war might not even be aware of their rights, their legal options, or the support resources that are available to them.

Education programs, resource development and accessibility and awareness-raising efforts are essential to help overcome all of these barriers.

*If you or someone you know is a survivor of sexual assault in Australia, including sexual violence that occurred in a refugee camp or detention centre, there are support services and resources available to help. Please refer to the end of this Guide for helpful suggestions for organisations and agencies that can provide support.*

## **What are the laws regarding sexual violence as a form of warfare?**

*Please be aware that the following information is general in nature and is not legal advice.*

Human rights legislation and international humanitarian law (IHL) have provisions that address sexual violence, including rape, as a crime against humanity and a war crime. The following important legal systems address the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war:

### **Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols**

International Humanitarian Law is based on the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. The Geneva Conventions' Common Article 3 forbids all forms of violence against life and person, including torture and harsh treatment. Victims of non-international armed conflicts are expressly covered by Additional Protocol II. Sexual violence and rape that occur during armed wars are regarded as breaches of these treaties.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, war crimes, and genocide according to the Rome Statute. People who commit these crimes are prosecuted by the ICC.

### **Resolutions Adopted by the UN Security Council**

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has passed a number of resolutions emphasising the outlawing of sexual violence during times of war. Resolution 1820 (2008) and later resolutions emphasise the need to put an end to the impunity of those who commit sexual assault and draw attention to the weaponry used in combat.

### **International Criminal Tribunals**

Cases involving the use of rape as a weapon of war have been heard by international criminal tribunals, including the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The establishment of legal precedents and the acknowledgment of sexual violence as a grave international offense were both aided by these tribunals.

### **Customary International Law**

Customary international law acknowledges the ban on sexual violence in armed situations and is founded on accepted state practice and legal foundations. Consistent state practice and *opinio juris*—which express a view that the activity is mandated by law—help customary law develop.

### **National Law**

Sexual violence committed during an armed war is prohibited by national laws in several countries. International legal norms may be incorporated into national laws and may also provide procedures for the prosecution of those who commit these offenses.

International organisations must hold individuals who perpetrate sexual assault crimes accountable, and governments must uphold and expand their legal frameworks against it.

## **Does Australia have any domestic laws that address the crime of rape and other forms of sexual violence as a weapon of war?**

Australia does not currently have any specific domestic laws that address rape as a weapon of war. Nonetheless, Australia has ratified international treaties and conventions that forbid war crimes, including the use of sexual force against civilians during conflict.

International legal norms are incorporated into Australian domestic law, and Australia has laws addressing significant international offenses such as crimes against humanity and war crimes. The main piece of law in this area is the War Crimes Act of 1945, which has been modified to include crimes against humanity and genocide in addition to offenses relating to violations of the laws and customs of war.

Australia has the authority to prosecute people for crimes during armed wars, including sexual violence, under the War Crimes Act. Australia's legal system complies with international norms outlined in agreements like the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the Geneva Conventions.

## **What are the legal processes in cases of sexual violence as a weapon of war?**

When rape is used as a weapon of war, both national and international legal systems are involved in the proceedings. The following is a brief summary of the legal processes.

*Please be aware that the following information is general in nature and is not legal advice.*

### **Legal Systems at the National Level**

**Investigation:** To obtain evidence that sexual assault qualifies as a war crime, national authorities must carry out in-depth investigations. Gathering witness statements, medical records, and other relevant information may be necessary.

**Arrest and Detention:** In compliance with national laws and processes, those identified as the alleged perpetrator/s during investigations must be taken into custody.

**Trial:** National courts hold trials for those who allegedly committed the crime/s. Survivors might be asked to testify as witnesses, and any resulting legal process must follow the rules of a fair trial.

### **International Criminal Courts:**

**International Criminal Court (ICC):** Those charged with war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide may be brought before the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC may bring charges in cases involving the use of rape as a weapon of war.

**Specialised International Tribunals:** Certain crimes committed during particular conflicts have given rise to the creation of specialised international tribunals, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR).

### **Units for Prosecution of War Crimes:**



To investigate and bring charges against anyone connected to war crimes, especially those involving sexual assault, some countries have set up specialist agencies or units dedicated to prosecuting war crimes, including sexual assault.

### **Global Collaboration:**

**Extradition:** To bring an accused person back to the country where their crimes were committed, extradition may be undertaken if the suspect is living in a different country.

**Mutual Legal Assistance:** To exchange evidence, speed up investigations, and aid in prosecutions, countries may participate in mutual legal assistance.

### **Witness Protection:**

It is vital to protect witnesses, particularly survivors. Witness protection programs and confidentiality measures are just two examples of the safeguards that legal systems need to have in place to protect the health, safety and wellbeing of their witnesses.

### **Victim Participation:**

Victim participation in legal proceedings is frequently permitted by international and hybrid tribunals. This may involve giving survivors the chance to voice their opinions and concerns, provide supporting documentation, and request compensation.

### **Compensation, Restitution, Reparations:**

Some courts have the authority to provide compensation to victims, which may consist of rehabilitation, restitution, and compensation. Reparations are meant to formally recognise the suffering that survivors have experienced and to aid in the healing process.

### **International humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights law:**

The legal processes pertaining to the use of rape as a weapon of war are founded in human rights law and international humanitarian law (IHL), which specify the prohibitions and obligations regarding sexual assault during times of armed conflict.

It is important to be mindful that the effectiveness of legal systems in delivering justice is dependent on the commitment of national and international actors to upholding and enforcing justice. Potential obstacles to victims/survivors obtaining justice may include jurisdictional issues, political considerations, and the need for exceptionally strong international cooperation to ensure accountability for these heinous crimes.

### **Can survivors make a report if the crime happened in another country?**

Investigating and prosecuting crimes that happened in another country can be difficult and are dependent on a number of factors, such as the laws of the nation where the abuse took place, the laws of the nation the victim is currently residing in (Australia in this case), and any relevant international agreements or conventions that may be in place.

If a crime has an extraterritorial component—that is, if it happened outside of Australia—law enforcement authorities may be able to investigate the crime. But the specific legal tools available and the prosecutorial power to pursue the perpetrator may differ. Some of the factors that might be taken into account include the following:

**Jurisdiction:** If the offender is an Australian citizen or resident, Australian law permits the prosecution of certain offenses committed overseas. Nevertheless, different laws may have different prerequisites and specifics, and not all crimes may be prosecuted.

**Extradition:** If an applicable extradition treaty or agreement is in effect and the accused offender is found in another country, Australia may request extradition. Through the legal procedure of extradition, one nation might ask another for the extradition of an individual so they can face charges or serve out their sentence.

**International Agreements:** Australia and other countries may have bilateral or multilateral agreements that promote collaboration in criminal matters, such as the investigation and prosecution of war crimes.

**Time Limits:** Statutes of limitations, which vary by jurisdiction, and which may apply differently for crimes committed in conflict situations, may impose time limits (or “statutes of limitations”) on when a prosecution can begin.

**Victim Support:** Victims of crime, including those who have been sexually assaulted, can receive help from organisations and support services available in Australia. These services can assist victims in navigating the judicial system, getting support, and understanding their rights.

*If you experienced sexual assault in another country and you are now living in Australia, if you are considering reporting the crime to the police or other authorities, it is recommended that you contact your local police or a specialist legal service about your particular circumstances. You may wish to have a friend or support person with you, and you may request the assistance of a translator if one is available. Seeking support from organisations that specialise in helping survivors of sexual assault can provide invaluable assistance and guidance.*

*Please refer to the end of this Guide for helpful suggestions for organisations and agencies that can provide support.*

### **What can help survivors of sexual violence as a weapon of war or torture?**

*“Initially I was hesitant to share as I felt I shouldn’t burden others. When I did share I felt unburdened ...” (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)*

It is imperative that victims/survivors of sexual violence in conflict situations, refugee camps and detention centres receive assistance and support to help them overcome and heal from the trauma.

#### **Access to Medical Care**

Survivors of sexual violence may require timely access to medical services to any treat physical wounds including potential internal injuries, avoid infections, and offer access to emergency contraception.

#### **Psychological Care and Counselling**

In order to help survivors deal with the psychological effects of sexual violence, trauma-informed counselling and mental health care are essential.

*Please refer to the end of this Guide for helpful suggestions for organisations and agencies that can provide support.*

## **Legal Support**

Survivors may require legal assistance such as supporting them if they choose to report the crime/s to the relevant authorities, guiding them through the court system, and informing them of their options for redress.

*Please refer to the end of this Guide for helpful suggestions for specialist legal organisations and agencies that can provide accurate information and support regarding legal options.*

## **Safe Spaces and Shelters**

It is essential to provide safe spaces or shelters where survivors can get assistance, support, and therapy.

*Please refer to the end of this Guide for helpful suggestions for organisations and agencies that can provide access to safe spaces, shelters and other support.*

## **Access to Education and Economic Empowerment**

Initiatives that assist with education and career development for survivors can help develop long term financial independence and the ability to have a “fresh start”. Education can play a vital role in ending the cycle of violence and facilitating long-term healing for survivors of sexual violence and torture.

## **Reintegration and Social Support**

It is essential to provide survivors with social and financial support as they reintegrate into the community. Overcoming stigma and isolation requires a strong sense of community awareness, acceptance and support.

## **Justice and Accountability**

Justice depends on holding perpetrators accountable for their crimes. To provide justice and comprehensive support for victims of rape as a weapon of war, cooperation between governments, non-governmental organisations, international agencies, and local communities is essential.

## **Trauma-Informed Policies**

At the national and international levels, creating and executing trauma-informed policies can direct the creation of initiatives and programs that acknowledge and address the unique needs of survivors of rape as a weapon of war and survivors of sexual violence in refugee camps and detention centres.

# HELPFUL INFORMATION ESPECIALLY FOR SURVIVORS

## COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMA AND THE EFFECTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Everybody's experience of sexual violence is different. As a survivor of sexual assault and violence, the experience may have an impact on your thoughts, feelings, actions, interpersonal relationships, as well as how you view and interact with the world.

### SOME COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

Your response to the trauma of sexual violence will be unique to you. It is possible that you will have some intense physical, psychological and/or emotional reactions. Your reactions might be immediate or they might take a while to happen. They might also suddenly emerge at unexpected (and inconvenient) times. Every person is different and there is no right or wrong way to react or not react to the trauma of sexual assault.

**Always remember, even if it takes some time, hope, healing and recovery are possible.**

Some of the physical reactions to trauma are listed below, as well as some of the common thoughts, feelings and behaviours that might occur in response to the trauma of sexual assault. Many of these reactions have been taken from the *"SARC – Care Package for Survivors"* and the details about this invaluable resource for survivors can be found at the end of this Guide).

#### Physical

Constipation   Diarrhoea   Dry mouth   Exhaustion   Feeling dizzy   Headaches   Loss of appetite  
Muscle tension   Other pains   Rapid heartbeat   Sweating   Tight chest

#### Thoughts

Confusion   Difficulty concentrating   Flashbacks   Intrusive memories   Nightmares   Poor memory   "It was my fault"   "I should have done more"   "I'm going crazy"   "I'll never be the same"   "Nobody will ever love me now"

**Feelings**   Hopelessness   Fear   Isolation/ Wanting to be Alone   Angry   Anxious

Alienated   Ashamed   Detached   Depressed   Emptiness   Guilty   Hurt

Inadequate   Insecure   Irritable   No confidence   Numb   Self-blame   Shame

Even though they might be strong, they might even feel overwhelming at times, emotions cannot kill you. They are inside of you and they are smaller than you. It is possible to recover control over your life and prevent the bad emotions from taking over. To do that, you will need to deal with your emotions and worries. A trusted person can help you to do this.

## Behaviours

Avoiding people/places    Being impulsive    Changes to eating    Drinking/smoking    Easily startled

Lack of interest in things    Nail-biting    Neglecting care of yourself    Self-harming    Socially withdrawing    Very alert / hyper-vigilant

A person's behaviours may change as a result of the sexual trauma. Changes in behaviour are a common response to trauma. While it is very normal, it can be very helpful to understand the feelings and ideas that may be leading to your actions.

## EFFECTS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE USED AS A WEAPON OF WAR OR TORTURE

Some effects of sexual violence when used as a weapon of warfare and/or torture identified by survivors can include:

- Intrusive memories and trying to manage intrusive memories

*"When I go to sleep all these things come like a movie"*

*"I can feel the pain in the dream."*

- Avoidance and dissociation

*"Sometimes when the pain gets so bad I go blank. I can't see anything and I don't know where I am or what's happening."*

- Substance abuse

- Anger and sleep difficulties

*"When I get angry I cannot control my anger. I go back to what happened."*

- Suicidal thoughts

*"My mind is always asking why we are living?"*

*"I think it is better to be dead as I would be released from the pain."*

- Difficulties with regulating feelings

*"Our thinking brain is not working... every day we have a power cut. A short circuit when the body shuts down."*

- Alteration in self-beliefs, self-esteem, and loss of manhood for male survivors

*"I have no strength".*

*"I am incapacitated."*

- Deep feelings of guilt and shame

*"I am not fully responsible but maybe I did something to bring it on."*

- Hopelessness

- Change in belief system and/or questioning religious beliefs.

*“God got on the earlier boat.”*

- Difficulties with trust and fear of being disbelieved (with the fear of not being believed extended to the Department of Immigration and the international community)

*“They don’t give any written documents about this (sexual torture) so there is no way to prove it”*

*“Some problems we tell others and they suspect whether it is true or not.”*

*“Only if they (the wider community) see with their own eyes will they believe.”*

(Fernandes & Aiello, 2018, p.22).

## **POST TRAUMATIC STRESS**

The range of emotions and behaviours that people may experience following a traumatic event is sometimes referred to as post-traumatic stress. Sometimes this is referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), however, more recently it has been recognised that the issues experienced by victims/survivors of trauma are a normal response to trauma and therefore the term “disorder” is counterproductive and not helpful. Post Traumatic Stress responses may include (but are not limited to) the following:

Distressing flashbacks, nightmares, and persistent and/or intrusive memories of the incident

Refraining from talking about the painful incident and avoiding people, places, and activities that might bring the trauma back to mind

Being so “on edge” that it interferes with your ability to focus and fall asleep

Being constantly on edge, aware and/or “hyper-vigilant”

Taking more and/or greater risks than normal

Being hyper-critical of yourself

Feeling “cut off” from others around you

Having intense emotions and ideas that remain

Losing interest in routine activities

## **COMPLEX POST TRAUMATIC STRESS (C-PTS)**

Complex Post-Traumatic Stress (C-PTS) is a condition that can arise from prolonged or repeated exposure to traumatic events, especially those from which escape is difficult or impossible. It is distinguished from PTS because of the chronic nature and severity of the trauma experienced including long-term abuse, domestic violence, torture, captivity, or trafficking.

### **Symptoms of C-PTS**

The symptoms of C-PTS can be extensive and multifaceted and often affect many areas of a victim’s/survivor’s life.

## Re-experiencing the Trauma

**Flashbacks:** Reliving the traumatic event as if it's happening again.

**Nightmares:** Disturbing dreams related to the trauma.

**Intrusive Memories:** Unwanted and distressing memories of the traumatic events.

## Avoidance and Numbing

**Avoidance:** Avoiding thoughts, feelings, places, and people associated with the trauma.

**Emotional Numbing:** Feeling detached from others, experiencing a lack of interest in activities, and having difficulty experiencing positive emotions.

## Hyperarousal and Reactivity

**Hypervigilance:** Being excessively alert and on guard for potential danger.

**Startle Response:** Being easily startled or jumpy.

**Irritability:** Frequent irritability or outbursts of anger.

**Sleep Disturbances:** Trouble falling or staying asleep.

## Negative Self-Perception

**Shame and Guilt:** Intense feelings of shame or guilt, often related to the trauma.

**Self-Blame:** Blaming oneself for the trauma or its consequences.

**Low Self-Esteem:** Chronic feelings of worthlessness or inadequacy.

## Difficulty with Emotional Regulation

**Emotional Dysregulation:** Difficulty managing emotions, leading to intense and unpredictable emotional responses.

**Difficulty Controlling Anger:** Frequent and intense anger that may be difficult to control.

**Self-Destructive Behaviours:** Engaging in risky or harmful behaviours as a way to cope with emotional pain.

## Interpersonal Problems

**Difficulty Trusting Others:** Finding it hard to trust people, leading to isolation or strained relationships.

**Attachment Issues:** Problems with forming and maintaining healthy relationships, either by becoming overly dependent or by avoiding closeness.

## Altered Perceptions

**Dissociation:** Feeling detached from reality, having out-of-body experiences, or feeling disconnected from oneself.

**Altered Beliefs:** Developing negative beliefs about oneself, others, or the world, often feeling that the world is a dangerous place.

If you are experiencing symptoms of C-PTS it is possible to get help to manage them and take the first steps towards healing and recovery. There are people and organisations who can provide expert and trauma-informed assistance and support. A list of support services is provided at the end of this Guide.

## **LONG TERM PHYSICAL AND HEALTH CONSEQUENCES**

Numerous common medical conditions such as headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, and neck discomfort, might be brought on by the trauma of sexual assault. Other symptoms might include aches and pains that have no other explanation. In addition, some chronic illnesses have also been linked to unresolved trauma, such as chronic lung and heart disorders, liver disease, viral hepatitis, liver cancer, autoimmune diseases, and sexually transmitted infections.

The symptoms associated with unresolved trauma can vary widely and are frequently difficult for medical professionals to explain. Not every healthcare professional is well-versed in the various effects of trauma. Nonetheless, general practitioners and other medical professionals are growing more knowledgeable in this area and are more attuned to the needs of trauma survivors. When trauma survivors see “trauma-informed” healthcare providers, who are knowledgeable about trauma-related issues and treat their patients with respect, cooperation, and support, they tend to have more positive experiences and outcomes. It is imperative that you receive help and support from someone who is “trauma-informed”.

## **SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY**

If you have been subjected to sexual assault or abuse you may find yourself struggling with letting yourself become close to another (emotionally and/ or physically) including issues with intimacy and sex. This is a perfectly normal and understandable reaction to a sexual trauma. While some people may experience problems immediately following the abuse or assault, for others it might occur weeks, months, or even years after the trauma. Be patient and kind with yourself, all aspects of healing from sexual assault can take time.

The following is a list of some of the most typical issues faced by victims of sexual assault or abuse in relation to sex and intimacy.

- Being overly sexual and consensually placing yourself in unsafe sexual situations perhaps because you feel you deserve to be treated badly
- \* Avoiding or feeling afraid of having sex
- Viewing having sex as a duty
- Feeling angry, disgusted, or guilty when touched
- Finding it difficult to become aroused or to feel sensation



- Feeling emotionally detached or absent during sex
- Experiencing intrusive or upsetting sexual thoughts and images

The following symptoms may also be present:

- \*vaginal pain or orgasmic difficulties
- \*obsessive, overactive or improper sexual behaviour
- \*difficulties establishing or sustaining an intimate connection
- \*erectile or ejaculatory dysfunction (for males).

Your beliefs and attitudes around sex may have changed as a result of the sexual violence. It is important to critically examine the beliefs you have developed and to remind yourself that healthy sex is not involved in sexual trauma; abusive sex is and sex is not always abusive.

#### **Unhealthy sexual attitudes and beliefs that can come about as a result of abuse**

- Sex is unsafe
- Sex is about satisfying one person
- Sex is addictive
- Sex is uncontrollable
- Sex is essential to be loved

#### **Healthy sex attitudes and beliefs**

- Sex is a choice
- Sex is respectful
- Sex is about sharing
- Sex is private
- Sex is safe and intimate

See the “SARC – Care Package for Survivors” for more information on this important issue.

#### **“WAS IT MY FAULT?”**

Survivor’s tendency to blame themselves is one of the most common effects of sexual assault. If you have experienced sexual violence, you might have blamed yourself for what happened, you might still be blaming yourself.

**It is important to remember that you were not to blame for the sexual assault. The perpetrator bears full responsibility for the crime that was committed against you.**

Recognising that you were not to blame for the assault is a significant step towards recovery even though you might need to hear this many times from many different sources before you believe it and can start truly healing.

Many survivors, including survivors of sexual violence used in conflict or as a form of torture, have reported saying mantras to themselves to be very helpful. One survivor found the following mantra to be very helpful and suggested that repeating it out loud to yourself might be helpful for you too:

*The sexual assault was not my fault.*

*The sexual assault was not my fault.*

*The sexual assault was not my fault.*

If you need to take a break from reading this Guide, please feel free to put it down and pick it up at a later time when you are ready again to start reading.

### **“Why do I feel ashamed about what has happened to me?”**

Shame is another very common effect of sexual assault. This is due, in part, to the taboo and secrecy surrounding sexual assault. Many adult victims of sexual violence find it awkward to discuss because it involves both sexual activity and the intimate areas of the body. Because of this, people who experience sexual assault often believe that something “dirty” has happened to them and that they are somehow “dirty” as a result. This is a very common response, especially if your culture places great value on sexual purity or virginity before marriage, as you may feel that you are “damaged goods” and no-one will want to date or marry you in the future. If you are a male survivor, you may feel that the assault has affected your sense of masculinity.

However, it is important to remind yourself that you are not to blame for the crime that was perpetrated against you. You have nothing to feel guilty, embarrassed or ashamed about, in fact, you can feel strong and courageous that you survived the experience.

### **“What if I am still being affected by the crime?”**

If you have experienced sexual violence within a conflict or war situation, refugee camp or detention centre, the effects of the sexual assault might surface or re-surface at any moment and sometimes unexpectedly. Flashbacks, nightmares, panic attacks, depression, mistrust of men (or women), and other reactions might arise when you least expect it. The effects of the crime could arise, for instance, if you see something in your environment that reminds you of the assault, if you have to (or happen to) see the perpetrator, if you start a close, sexual relationship, amongst a wide range of other possible triggers.

Many refugees and asylum seekers are afraid to talk to the police or other authorities if they have been subjected to sexual assault because they are concerned that it might have a negative impact on their visa application or status.

***If you are reluctant to report sexual assault for this reason it is important to discuss your situation with a specialist legal service if you are concerned you or your family may be at risk if you report the crime and are worried that reporting the crime may negatively impact your application for asylum or visa status.***

All victims of crime, including victims/survivors of sexual violence, have rights and safeguards. There are a number of organisations and agencies that can help you and help to protect you and your loved ones. *See the end of this Guide for a list of organisations that can help.*

Finding support to help you recover from the trauma you experienced can be very helpful if the effects of the crime are having an impact on your life. Although the past events cannot be changed, you have the power to alter the present.

## WHO CAN HELP ME?

If you decide to tell someone about what has happened to you, it is important to find a safe person to talk to. A safe person is someone who:

- is likely to believe you
- cares about you
- will want to help you, and
- will respect your privacy.

Speaking with a partner or spouse, close family member, or trusted best friend can be comforting for some survivors of sexual assault. This isn't always possible for other people for many reasons including the information not being kept confidential and/or possibly reaching the ears of the perpetrator which can be an unsafe situation. Speaking with a counsellor or therapist can help some people.

## GETTING HELP

*“Initially I was hesitant to share as I felt I shouldn’t burden others. When I did share I felt unburdened and I realised that others had also been through torture and some worse than mine.” (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)*

In order to get the support and assistance you are entitled to, it can be helpful to discuss your experiences with someone you can trust. It could be your best friend, your spouse, your boyfriend or girlfriend, a close and trustworthy relative, or a counsellor. You have the freedom to choose who you would like to speak with.

One of the main reasons to tell a trustworthy friend or family member about your experience is to relieve yourself of the burden of carrying the secret, to regain your personal power and to be reassured *that you are not to blame for what happened to you.*

Some survivors may be very nervous reticent about seeing a counsellor because they feel that if the counsellor ends up not being the ‘right match’ for them and speaking to that person will have been a waste of time. However, some survivors meet up with a few different counsellors at the beginning until they find the right person for them.

When you read the list of agencies and organisations at the end of this Guide, and if you call one of the numbers provided, you can request what kind of counsellor you would prefer to meet with, including if they are male or female.

**Your voice and opinion are important and you can let people know who you feel you will most comfortable talking with.**

Open communication about the issue of sexual violence is crucial if we want to enable all victims of abuse to come forward and receive the assistance and support they are entitled to. This is another crucial strategy for stopping sexual violence.

### WHAT CAN HELP SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

1. To be believed
2. To be understood
3. To be told “This was not your fault”
4. To have a safe and confidential environment where the survivor can speak openly about his or her feelings
5. To have his or her value as a person reinforced
6. To overcome the shame and humiliation of a sexual attack
7. To build or re-build their self-esteem
8. To get back in contact with his or her feelings
9. To speak out the truth of their lives

If the first person you speak with doesn't react in a helpful or positive way, remember that you have not done anything wrong. Find someone else to talk with – don't give up! Sometimes finding the 'right' counsellor for you can take time and a few different attempts.

## WHAT CAN HELP?

*“(In my mind, I) went all the way back to my mother’s womb to try and find a place of strength.” (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)*

### Create Safety

Being and feeling safe is essential for recovery from sexual assault.

In order to find out if you are indeed feeling safe, you might want to ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I safe from further contact with the offender including physically, on social media, etc?
- Do I feel safe at home?
- Is there anything I need to change in order to feel and be safe?

To begin the healing process, you will need to establish your safety and sense of safety as a *first priority*. If you are currently at risk of violence of any kind, get help to find safety including staying at a trusted friend or family's members house or accessing a domestic violence refuge shelter. If you are not safe and/or are not feeling safe, it is important to work out what you need to do to be safe. Talking to someone and getting help and support to put safety measures in place for yourself is essential as you may not be able to do this by yourself.

A list of support services is provided at the end of this Guide including 24/7 confidential crisis counselling numbers that can help if you ever find yourself needing immediate help.

### Show Self-Compassion

In order to begin to heal from the trauma of sexual violence, you need to be able to be compassionate and kind towards yourself. This can be difficult if there is any part of yourself that blames yourself for what happened.

One way to overcome this and be able to be kind to yourself is to think about someone who has been kind to you in the past and imagine having this compassion and care for yourself. What would a caring friend say to you? What kind messages would a kind and caring friend give? Give these same messages to yourself. If you are still struggling to be compassionate towards yourself, imagine hearing from another innocent person who has gone through what you have gone through and is now struggling with the feelings and effects that you are experiencing. In what ways would you show them kindness? What words would you say to help them? Do these things and say these things to yourself. Give this compassion and kindness to yourself in some way every day.

One survivor recommends putting two chairs side by side together in a room that you feel safe in, sit in one chair and talk to the empty chair as if you are talking to a sexual assault or rape victim, helping them through their healing journey.

## Talk to Someone You Trust

Speaking with someone who is sympathetic, understanding, and helpful is one of the best ways to begin healing from the trauma of sexual violence. This might be a trusted friend or relative, or it could be a trauma-specialist expert. For many survivors, speaking with a professional counsellor in addition to friends and family can be extremely beneficial.

When choosing who to talk with, consider whether they will:

- Respect your privacy
- Listen to you without blaming you
- Be supportive
- Let you make the final decision

Some people find it challenging to discuss their experiences with people they know. Speaking with a qualified counsellor can be a crucial step in the recovery process. Counsellors with expertise in sexual assault trauma are trained to recognise and assist with the many effects of trauma.

## Find and Strengthen Positive Connections

Developing relationships of trust and compassion with safe, loving people who do not harm others is a crucial aspect of healing from sexual violence. It can take some time to regain trust after suffering sexual abuse. You may feel like you want to withdraw and isolate yourself from people. However, positive and healthy connections and relationships with people can have a profoundly therapeutic and positive effect on you and your life. A safe circle of friends, community and/or family members can take some time to develop for anyone, let alone victims of sexual abuse or rape, whose trust has been severely violated. Be gentle with yourself and allow yourself to slowly build trust.

## Do Something You Enjoy Every Day

Every day, try to engage in an activity you enjoy. Taking care of yourself is essential, so schedule time each day for something you enjoy. Make time every day to unwind and prepare larger treats in advance so you always have something to look forward to.

Here are some ideas from the “SARC – Care Package for Survivors”:

- Book tickets to a movie, show or sporting event
- Light candles, diffuse essential oils or burn incense
- Read a good book
- Listen to your favourite music
- Plan a camping, snorkelling or hiking trip
- Soak in a warm bath filled with bubbles, bath salts or essential oils
- Go for a picnic

- Swim in the sea or walk on the sand or do both!
- Watch the sunset
- Go for a bike ride
- See a live band
- Have a massage
- Cook your favourite meal
- Meet a friend for coffee and maybe cake!
- Spend time in the garden and buy or pick fresh flowers

Here are some of the methods other survivors have found helpful:

Painting and other forms of art therapy

Music

Dance

Drama

Physical activity or sports, such as self-defence, martial arts

Writing and / or reading poetry

Writing a diary

Other forms of creative writing and expression

Spiritual healing

Reading about other people's experiences

Joining a group of other survivors

***"... some of the stories the group told I had never heard about, it helped me to understand my own experiences."***  
*(Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)*

Talking to a trusted friend or relative

Talking to a counsellor

Reporting the abuse to the Police

Seeking justice

Helping others who have been abused

Spending time with animals



## **Become Active for Positive Change**

***“I do not want anyone else to experience what I have been through—beaten and tortured. I like to share so others can know how to be careful.” (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)***

Some survivors find that getting active for change honours the fact that they are survivors and inspires them to advocate for human rights. Making a public statement about sexual assault or child sexual abuse is one way to take a stand. Taking part in protest marches, signing petitions, participating in survivor forums, and lobbying lawmakers for reform are all ways that survivors can become empowered and can empower others to make positive change in the world.

## **Seek Cultural Healing**

Many people believe that cultural customs and rituals have great healing power. They can strengthen a sense of identity and purpose, nurture a sense of belonging, and facilitate meaningful relationships. They can also provide a safe avenue for self-expression and exploration. Understanding your culture with language, customs, artwork, dancing, storytelling, traditional foods, and medicines can all play an important role in social, emotional, and spiritual recovery and healing from sexual violence.

## **Establish a Balanced, Healthy Lifestyle**

Developing and maintaining a healthy, balanced lifestyle can be another crucial component of healing and recovery. Important aspects of a balanced and healthy lifestyle can include:

- Making sure you are safe.
- Seeking professional help if needed.
- Limiting your exposure to trauma stories and bad news.
- Informing and educating yourself about trauma and what you are experiencing.
- Managing your stress and anxiety.
- Connecting with others.
- Getting health checks.
- Exercising regularly.
- Challenging your brain.
- Practicing meditation and mindfulness.
- Helping others.
- Expressing gratitude for the good things.
- Having safe physical contact.
- Sleeping well.

- Using positive self-talk.
- Eating a healthy diet.
- Getting sunshine.
- Being creative.
- Laughing often.
- Stimulating your senses daily, such as tasting delicious foods or smelling the aroma of flowers or essential oils.
- Breaking routines, trying new things, and learning new skills.
- Having a sense of purpose in life.

### **Look for Positives and Actively Practice Gratitude**

It can be easy to forget to notice the positives in our lives and the beauty all around us. Regularly practising gratitude is a very simple way to bring more balance and positivity into your life.

Perhaps you can create a gratitude notebook or journal where you can actively acknowledge even the small things in life that you are grateful for. For example:

- First thing each morning write down three things that you are grateful for in your life
- Decorate your gratitude page if you would like to
- Each evening, write down at least three positive things from your day
- When you are having a low day, read back over what you have written
- Try to make this a habit – you will be amazed at the positive difference it makes!

### **Keep Going**

Healing can sometimes be slow-going, gradual, with lots of ups and downs. It might take a lot of time, effort, and ongoing work to reach a place in your life where you feel okay or even happy, but the journey is worthwhile. Be encouraged that many survivors of sexual violence have been able to find happiness again in their life ... it is possible!

Like everyone else, you will have good days and bad days. On a 'bad day', give yourself permission to feel your feelings (both negative and positive). When you are having a particularly difficult day, sometimes it helps to just put everything on hold for the day, make an effort to get a decent night's sleep, and then face the world again the next day. But the important thing is to keep going. A good day is just around the corner so reach out for help if you need it and don't give up!

## **BUILDING A HEALTHY SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP**

**Trust and intimacy can be extremely difficult for people who have experienced sexual violence.**

***“I think I could not have sex with my wife because of what he did to me. I am not sure if I will be able to have sex with a woman because of this.” (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)***

Physical touch can cause involuntary reactions for some survivors, such as panic attacks, freezing, flashbacks, zoning out (dissociation), or nausea. These reactions might occur within the context of a sexual relationship.

### **Healthy sex and sexual trauma are very different.**

Healthy sex involves respect, equal control and safety for both parties. Healthy sex is pleasurable, enjoyable and satisfying. If you are having difficulties with intimacy and trust following sexual assault, take your time, be patient and be kind to yourself. Communicate with and involve your partner. Sometimes, couples therapy can be helpful for those in a committed relationship or else speaking one-on-one with a professional regarding barriers to physical, sexual and emotional closeness following sexual violence.

The “SARC – Care Package for Survivors” provides some useful practical strategies to assist in dealing with being “triggered” during sexual activity in the context of a sexual relationship. There are also other people, books and websites that can assist.

### **WHAT IF I AM STILL BEING AFFECTED BY WHAT HAPPENED TO ME?**

The effects of sexual violence might surface or re-surface at any moment and sometimes unexpectedly. Flashbacks, nightmares, panic attacks, depression, mistrust of men (or women), and other symptoms might arise when you least expect it. The effects of the abuse could arise, for instance, if you have to see the perpetrator, if you start a close, sexual relationship, etc. Seeking therapy and support to help you recover from the trauma you have experienced may be beneficial if the effects of the trauma are having a detrimental impact on your life.

### **Although the past events cannot be changed, you have the power to alter the present.**

### **CAN COUNSELLING HELP?**

Understandably, some individuals are hesitant to seek counselling for personal issues. Although there are a number of causes for this, dread of the unknown is probably the most common. For people who generally don't verbally communicate their feelings, it might be particularly intimidating. There may be some stigma attached to counselling in certain countries and cultures, and there may be misconceptions about what counselling entails.

Above all, the purpose of counselling is to help you, and the counsellor's job is to listen to your worries and emotions. Some people are afraid to attend counselling sessions because they believe they will have to go into great detail about the sexual assault. However, you don't have to discuss anything you don't want to in counselling. You can provide as little or as much detail as you feel comfortable with. If you feel the counsellor is asking too many questions that you don't feel safe answering at that point in time, let them know that and they will respect your boundaries and stop. Some people worry that their conversations won't be kept private, but counsellors must abide

by a stringent code of conduct and keep whatever you say private (unless there is a risk to your safety or the safety of others).

Survivors of sexual assault from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds may also be afraid that seeking counselling or attending counselling might have a detrimental impact of their application for residency in Australia. It is important to be reassured that seeking or attending counselling services will not affect a person's application for permanent residency or their visa status. Counselling is a tremendously helpful tool for many people as they work towards healing from abuse and all survivors of sexual crime have a right to receive help and support.

If the sexual assault you experienced is having a detrimental effect on your daily life it is a sign that you might need or benefit from professional support. It is important to seek help to cope with the effects of sexual assault so that they don't dominate your life and cause serious effects in the long term. Good mental health is just as important as good physical health. It takes an enormous amount of courage to talk to someone about your experiences. But not seeking help can often lead to the situation becoming worse.

A good starting point might be to speak to your doctor about a referral to a psychologist, mental health social worker or therapist. It is important that you find a worker who you feel comfortable with. Sometimes it can take several sessions talking with the counsellor before you start to trust them. If you really don't feel comfortable with your worker, try someone different. Remember, people working in the trauma area hear trauma stories every day. While everybody's experiences are different and unique, they are familiar with the many feelings and challenges faced by people who have survived sexual trauma and they won't judge or blame you. Even if therapy gets more difficult, have faith in your ability to heal.

**Above all, never give up on yourself!**

*You can find a list of specialist services for survivors of sexual assault, trauma and torture and other related support services in NSW and Australia at the end of this Guide.*

# REPORTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE TO THE AUTHORITIES

*Please be aware that the following information is general in nature and is not legal advice.*

Some survivors find a lot of relief in reporting the sexual assault to police and seeking justice through the legal system. For some survivors it is a matter of ensuring there are consequences for the perpetrator and to prevent other potential victims from being subjected to the same abuse. Reporting the crime can be important for the survivor's own safety. Reporting could make sure that mechanisms are put in place to mitigate the risks of the victim being unsafe again (for example, the police can issue an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) on the victim's behalf), if the perpetrator is known to them.

It is possible for female or male survivors to request women police officers to speak to if this makes them feel more comfortable with reporting. It is also possible for male survivors to request male police officers if this makes them more comfortable with reporting.

However, it is important to know that making an official report to the police is not something you have to do. It is completely your choice. The justice system is sometimes limited in the justice it can achieve and it can be an extremely daunting, and at times, insensitive process. Justice may not be delivered in the end, which can be a re-traumatising experience itself. Nevertheless, some survivors find at least reporting to police, making a statement and having their voice heard to be helpful.

**Reporting the abuse is your decision and only you can decide what is best for you.**

Another option of reporting in NSW called **Sexual Assault Reporting Option**. Although it doesn't initiate an investigation and is not a formal report, it creates a record of what occurred and allows the NSW Police Force to gather information on sexual offences and offending. It could be the first step if you are unsure about pursuing a legal case against the perpetrator but would like the police to have the information.

Seeking legal advice from specialist legal services and support from specialist domestic and family violence services for survivors of sexual abuse is critical. Many of these organisations can help you with developing and implementing a safety plan, provide holistic and trauma-informed care and support you to make an informed decision about reporting to police. In an emergency always dial 000.

*You can find a list of some of some specialist legal and other services at the end of this Guide.*

## **CAN I MAKE A REPORT IF THE CRIME HAPPENED IN ANOTHER COUNTRY?**

If you experienced sexual assault in another country and you are now living in Australia, if you are considering reporting the crime to the police or other authorities, it is recommended that you contact local police or a legal expert about your particular circumstances. You may wish to have a friend or support person with you, and you may request the assistance of a translator if one is available. Seeking support from organisations that specialise in helping survivors of sexual crimes can provide in valuable assistance and guidance. See the end of this Guide for a list of specialist support services.

You may not be certain if you will have to go back to your previous country and have concerns that going back after reporting to Australian law enforcement will put you in danger. You can discuss these and any other concerns you have by contacting any of the relevant specialist organisations and agencies listed at the end of this Guide.

Investigating and prosecuting sexual assault that happened in another country can be difficult and is dependent on a number of factors, such as the laws of the country where the abuse took place, the laws of the nation the victim is currently residing in (Australia in this case), and any relevant international agreements or conventions.

If a crime has an extraterritorial component—that is, it happened outside of Australia—the police may be able to investigate it. Some of the factors that may be taken into account include the following:

**Jurisdiction:** If the offender is an Australian citizen or resident, Australian law permits the prosecution of certain offenses committed overseas. Nevertheless, different laws may have different prerequisites and specifics, and not all crimes may be prosecuted.

**Extradition:** If an applicable extradition treaty or agreement is in effect and the accused offender is found in another nation, Australia may request extradition. Through the legal procedure of extradition, one nation might ask another for the extradition of an individual so they can face charges or serve out their sentence.

**International Agreements:** Australia and other nations may have bilateral or multilateral agreements that promote collaboration in criminal matters, such as the investigation and prosecution of sexual assault cases.

**Time Limits:** Statutes of limitations may impose time limits on if or when a prosecution can begin.

**Victim Support:** Victims of crime, especially those who have been sexually assaulted, can receive help from organisations and support services available in Australia. These services can assist survivors in navigating the judicial system, getting support, and understanding their rights.

If you experienced sexual assault in another country and you are now living in Australia, if you are considering reporting the crime to the police or other authorities, it is recommended that you contact the police or a specialist legal organisation about your particular circumstances.

You may wish to have a friend or support person with you, and you may request the assistance of a translator if one is available. Seeking support from organisations that specialise in helping survivors of sexual assault can provide in valuable assistance and guidance.

*You can find a list of some specialist support services at the end of this Guide.*

## **HOW DO I MAKE A REPORT AND WHO DO I REPORT TO IF THE CRIME HAPPENED IN AUSTRALIA?**

*Please be aware that the following information is general in nature and is not legal advice.*

Reporting sexual crime requires navigating specific processes and procedures and you will most likely need the assistance of organisations that have been created to handle such cases. It is important to know that procedures may differ across states and territories but generally speaking, the process of reporting sexual violence involves the following steps:

### **Seeking Support**

You can obtain support from specialised services or organisations that assist survivors of sexual violence. These organisations can provide counselling, information, and assistance throughout the reporting process. This can happen before or after the report has been made to the police. This may be especially helpful if you choose to

pursue legal action as the legal process can be extremely difficult emotionally. See the end of this Guide for a list of specialist support services.

### **Contacting the Police**

You can report the incidents to the local police. In some cases, specialised units may handle these cases such as the NSW Sex Crimes Squad. Many police offices have access to translators, interpreters and Multicultural Liaison Officers.

### **Legal Advice**

It may be helpful to seek legal advice to understand all your rights and options. Legal professionals experienced in handling cases of child sexual assault can provide you with advice and guidance tailored to your specific situation. See the end of this Guide for a list of specialist legal services.

### **Medical Investigation**

You may decide to go through a medical examination, depending on the situation, in order to record any physical proof or injuries connected to the abuse. You can consent to or decline the medical examination.

### **Preserving Evidence**

As in cases of recent crimes, it may be crucial for an investigation to save any pertinent evidence, including documents, letters, and personal belongings.

### **Police Investigation**

In order to look into the reported history of abuse, the police may speak with you (the “victim”), possible witnesses, and the suspected perpetrator.

### **Legal Actions**

Legal actions may be taken if the police investigation produces enough evidence to warrant charges being laid against the alleged offender. You may have to testify if the case is brought before a judge and/or jury. This can be extremely difficult for survivors, it can even be re-traumatising. For example, some survivors may be required to testify and be cross-examined in front of the perpetrator, whether in person or remotely.

### **Redress and Compensation**

Some victims/survivors may be eligible to apply for victims of crimes financial compensation. You will need to check with a legal advisor or knowledgeable professional to find out which, if any, crimes compensation scheme you may be eligible for such as Victims Services in NSW.

### **Statutory Limitations**

Statutory constraints might apply to cases of historical sexual assault. In order to give survivors more time to come forward, some countries have eliminated or extended their statutes of limitations.

*It can be extremely beneficial to obtain help from counselling services, support groups, and other options accessible to survivors of sexual violence throughout the reporting and legal process. These services can help you to access the many tools available to provide assistance and support, before, during and after the reporting process.*

## **BARRIERS TO MAKING A REPORT FACED BY SURVIVORS FROM REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKER**

### **BACKGROUNDS AND TEMPORARY VISA HOLDERS**

Similar to other victims of sexual violence, if you are a refugee, if you are seeking asylum and/or if you are a temporary visa holder, you may have extra concerns when considering reporting sexual assault in Australia.

### **FEAR OF REPRISALS OR RETALIATION**

It is possible that you may be afraid of reprisals or revenge from the offender, particularly if they come from similar communities or cultural backgrounds. If the offender is a member of the same community as you your concerns may be intensified.

### **CULTURAL OR RELIGIOUS STIGMA**

You may come from a culture or community where there is a stigma associated with sexual assault, mental health problems, and talking about sexual matters. You may feel reluctant to report the sexual violence out of fear that members of your community will judge you harshly and / or deliberately isolate you or your loved ones.

### **DISTRUST OF AUTHORITIES**

If your country of origin is one where the legal and law enforcement agencies are viewed as corrupt or untrustworthy it might make you very hesitant to report the crime. You might be extremely reluctant to disclose instances of sexual assault to Australian authorities as a result of your general distrust of authorities. If you have been sexually abused or raped by a member/s of law enforcement or another "official" government authority from your country of origin you might be especially hesitant to report the crime to Australian authorities.

### **LANGUAGE CHALLENGES**

If you have limited English language skills it might make it difficult for you to communicate effectively with the police and other support agencies or anxious that you will find it difficult. You might also be afraid of not being understood or the possibility of the details you provide being misinterpreted.

### **LACK OF EXPERIENCE WITH THE AUSTRALIAN LEGAL SYSTEM**

It can be quite difficult to understand court proceedings, legal jargon, and reporting requirements, all of which can make reaching out to make a report and/or get support extremely difficult for any survivor but especially so for survivors from CALD, refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

### **FEAR OF BEING DETAINED OR DEPORTED**

You may be afraid to disclose sexual assault because of worries about your immigration status. One major obstacle may be a fear of being arrested, deported, or having your application or case negatively impacted. Some people who are new to Australia also be in fear of returning to a country where they have been sexually abused or raped by a member/s of law enforcement or other officials from that country.

### **LACK OF AWARENESS OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS AVAILABLE IN AUSTRALIA**

Some, perhaps many, survivors from CALD, refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds and those holding temporary visas may be unaware of the resources available to help victims of sexual assault in Australia. This lack of awareness may prevent victims/survivors from accessing the assistance they deserve. It is hoped that this Guide and the We



Are Survivors! resources will be a helpful first step for you.

### **CONCERNS ABOUT THE INTERPRETER**

A major fear that some survivors of sexual assault from CALD and non-English-speaking backgrounds is that they might know the Interpreter (they may be from the same community) or that the Interpreter might know the alleged perpetrator. For example, you might be worried that what you say might not be kept confidential. You might also be concerned that what you say might not be translated accurately.

### **CULTURAL INSENSITIVITY**

When interacting with survivors from different backgrounds, some police and support services may not be culturally sensitive or competent. This might make you feel mistrustful and reluctant to engage with authorities.

### **PAST TRAUMA AND/OR DIFFICULTIES WITH MENTAL HEALTH**

If you are a refugee or asylum seeker you may have also suffered from previous trauma and possibly mental health issues arising from the past trauma. The psychological obstacles arising from all the trauma you have experienced may make it especially challenging to talk about and disclose the sexual violence you have been subjected to.

### **DESIRE TO FORGET THE PAST AND HAVE A FRESH START**

Some survivors may wish to forget the traumas they experienced before arriving in Australia and have a “fresh start” completely. Unfortunately, the experience of sexual assault is not easily “forgotten” and attempts to bury the memories or experience may result in further and ongoing trauma for you. Obtaining help and support may actually be the most effective way to obtain a fresh start.

# WHAT ARE THE LEGAL PROCESSES?

*Please be aware that the following information is general in nature and is not legal advice.*

Reporting sexual assault requires navigating specific processes and procedures and you will most likely need the assistance of organisations that have been created to handle such cases.

In Australia, a person is presumed innocent unless proven guilty under the law. When someone is accused of sexual assault, the police may file a charge (or charges) against them. This initiates a court case where the accused is tried for the offense or offenses, judged guilty or not, and punished if found guilty. This process involves the person who experienced the abuse. Even if the victim is the one who has suffered, sexual assault is legally regarded as a crime against the community, which is why the victims/survivors are referred to as “witnesses” in the proceedings. As a result, the victim/survivor does not need to hire their own lawyer because the community prosecutes through the Attorney General. There is no requirement for the victim/survivor to appear in court if the offender pleads guilty.

Since the investigation and judicial processes can be extremely emotionally taxing and even frightening for survivors, it is imperative that they receive complete support throughout the process.

## **SURVIVORS HAVE RIGHTS**

You have rights when seeing a professional support for sexual assault.

You have the right

- To be treated with dignity, respect and understanding.
- To be provided with a safe, confidential place for counselling and/or other support.
- To make decisions about your own life.
- To have a support person with you if you choose.
- To have access to an interpreter.
- To express yourself without being judged.

Even though recovery from sexual assault is a complex process, it is possible to recover with the right care and support. While survivors of sexual violence are not necessarily “scarred for life”, many survivors who have healed from the abuse say that they were forever changed by it. Although you may be forever changed by your experience, you too can heal.

# INFORMATION FOR LOVED ONES, FAMILY MEMBERS, FRIENDS AND OTHER SUPPORTERS

## HOW CAN I HELP AND SUPPORT A SURVIVOR OF RAPE AS A WEAPON OF WAR?

Understanding the specific needs of a survivor of rape as a weapon of war requires empathy and sensitivity. Here are a few ways you may help and show your support:

### **Listen Attentively**

Provide a secure, accepting environment where the survivor can talk about their experiences.

Actively listen to them and acknowledge their emotions without coercing them into disclosing more information than they are comfortable with.

### **Honour Their Decisions**

Whether it's reporting the incident, getting medical attention, or going through the judicial system, respect the survivor's choices. Everyone's journey to healing is unique, and that survivors may have their own needs and timeframes.

### **Educate Yourself**

Learn about the psychological ramifications, the impact of sexual assault, and the resources for support that are available to survivors and their loved ones. The more you know the better you can support the survivor.

### **Provide Practical Help**

Offer to provide support with daily tasks, such as transportation to medical, counselling, immigration or other appointments, or help out with housework or preparing a meal, for example. Practical support with simple daily living tasks can be invaluable.

### **Encourage Professional Assistance**

Support the survivor to contact specialist services, therapists, counsellors, or survivor groups for assistance. You can offer to help them locate nearby services or, if it makes them feel more comfortable, offer to go with them to appointments.

### **Respect Boundaries**

Recognise the boundaries set by the victim and honour their right to privacy. It is crucial not to press the survivor to provide information or participate in activities which they find uncomfortable.

### **Provide Emotional Support**

Simply by being there, and being sympathetic, and understanding, you can provide invaluable emotional support. Reassure the survivor that you will be there for them to help them on their healing journey and that they are not alone.

## **Advocate**

Speak out for the needs and rights of the survivor, particularly if they are interacting with the legal or medical systems. Provide your assistance in making sure they have access to the right resources and services.

## **Be Patient**

Both healing and recovery are slow processes. It is important to recognise that obstacles may arise along the journey and exercise patience and kindness.

Always keep in mind that your job is to provide assistance to the survivor, not to take the place of expert services. Encourage the survivor to seek professional assistance when it is clear that they need it.

**It can be extremely daunting and sometimes overwhelming to help someone through such a horrific event, so think about getting support for yourself as well.**

*Organisations that focus on sexual violence prevention or trauma support can also provide you with valuable information, advice and support.*

## **HOPE, HEALING AND RECOVERY ARE POSSIBLE!**

***"I feel freed."*** (Survivor, cited in Fernandes & Aiello, 2018)

*To all survivors ...*

Even though the journey is filled with many challenges, ups and downs, good days and bad ones, with the right care and support, it is possible to recover from the trauma of sexual violence.

We hope that this Guide has given you hope that healing and recovery are possible and that you are feeling better equipped to take the next steps in *your* healing journey.

***We commend you on your strength, courage and resilience and we wish you well in the next stage of your journey!***

# SERVICES THAT CAN HELP

In Australia, a number of organisations and services are available to help survivors of sexual violence from all cultural backgrounds. These services provide a range of support, including medical, psychological, legal, and advocacy assistance.

## **INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATING SERVICES**

### **TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING SERVICE (TIS) NATIONAL**

**<https://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/Contact-us>**

TIS provides immediate phone interpreting services.

Call and request an interpreter 24 hours a day, every day of the year

**Phone: 131 450 (within Australia)**

**Phone: +613 9268 8332 (outside Australia)**

Automated Telephone Interpreting Service (ATIS)

Call and request an interpreter 24 hours, every day of the year

**Phone: 1800 131 450**

Free Interpreting Service (FIS)

Enquiries about free services

**Email: [tis.freeinterpreting@homeaffairs.gov.au](mailto:tis.freeinterpreting@homeaffairs.gov.au)**

**Phone: 1300 575 847**

**Postal address**

TIS National GPO Box 241 MELBOURNE VIC 3001

## **SUPPORT SERVICES FOR PEOPLE FROM ASYLUM-SEEKING AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS**

### **NSW SERVICE FOR THE TREATMENT AND REHABILITATION OF TORTURE AND TRAUMA SURVIVORS (STARTTS)**

STARTTS is a specialist, not-for-profit organisation that provides culturally relevant psychological treatment and support, and community interventions, to help people and communities heal the scars of torture and refugee trauma and rebuild their lives in Australia.

**<https://www.startts.org.au>**

152–168 The Horsley Drive  
Carramar NSW 2163

**Phone: (02) 9646 6700**

**Fax: (02) 9646 6710**

**Email: [stts-startts@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:stts-startts@health.nsw.gov.au)**

## **ASYLUM SEEKERS CENTRE (ASC)**

The Asylum Seekers Centre is a place of welcome and support. The ASC provides practical help for people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney and advocate for fair and humane policies for refugees and people seeking asylum.

<https://asylumseekerscentre.org.au>

**Newtown** 43 Bedford Street  
Newtown, NSW 2042

**Phone: (02) 9078 1900** Hours: Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm

**Auburn** 44A Macquarie Road  
Auburn, NSW 2144 Hours: Wednesdays, 10am to 3pm

## **SETTLEMENT SERVICES INTERNATIONAL (SSI)**

<https://www.ssi.org.au>

SSI delivers a range of human services that connect individuals, families and children from diverse backgrounds with opportunities – from settlement support to disability programs, community engagement initiatives and training and employment pathways.

### **Head Office:**

2/158 Liverpool Road,

Ashfield NSW 2131

**Phone: (02) 8799 6700**

**Email: [info@ssi.org.au](mailto:info@ssi.org.au)**

## **SEXUAL VIOLENCE TELEPHONE HELPLINE SERVICES**

### **NSW Sexual Violence Helpline**

For anyone in NSW impacted by sexual assault (including friends, families and supporters). Available 24/7.

**Phone: 1800 424 017**

### **Sexual Abuse and Redress Support Service**

For adult survivors of childhood institutional sexual abuse. Supporting anyone accessing the Redress Scheme and alternative compensation. Available 24/7.

**Phone: 1800 211 028**

### **Sexual, Domestic and Family Violence Helpline**

For anyone in Australia whose life has been impacted by domestic or family violence. Available 24/7.

**Phone: 1800 943 539**

## **Rainbow Sexual, Domestic and Family Violence Helpline**

For anyone from the LGBTIQ+ community whose life has been impacted by sexual domestic and/or family violence. Available 24/7.

**Phone: 1800 497 212**

## **SEXUAL ASSAULT, COMPLEX TRAUMA AND/OR RELATED SERVICES**

### **NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR SERVICES AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE (NASAV)**

NASAV provides an Australian directory for sexual assault services.

**<https://www.nasasv.org.au>**

**<https://www.nasasv.org.au/support-directory>**

PO Box 442

Mandurah WA 6210

**Phone: (08) 9535 8263**

### **NSW HEALTH**

NSW Health has a network of specialist Sexual Assault Services (SAS) delivered by local health districts. Every local health district has a Sexual Assault Service that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week (see below).

**<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/parvan/sexualassault/Pages/health-sas-services.aspx>**

### **NSW VICTIMS SERVICES**

Victims Services in New South Wales offers support and assistance to victims of crime, including information on financial support and access to counselling services.

**<https://victimsservices.justice.nsw.gov.au>**

Commissioner of Victims' Rights  
Victims Services  
Department of Communities and Justice  
Locked Bag 5118  
Parramatta NSW 2124

**Phone: Victims Access Line: 1800 633 063**

**Translating and Interpreting Service: 131450**

**Aboriginal Contact Line: 1800 019 123**

**[https://www.police.nsw.gov.au/contact\\_us](https://www.police.nsw.gov.au/contact_us)**

**Voice calls or teletypewriter: 133677**

**Voice Speak and listen service: 1300 555 727**

**Email: [vs@dcj.nsw.gov.au](mailto:vs@dcj.nsw.gov.au)**

## **NSW DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES AND JUSTICE (DCJ)**

**[www.dcj.nsw.gov.au](http://www.dcj.nsw.gov.au)**

Head office location: 6 Parramatta Square, 10 Darcy Street, Parramatta.

Mailing address: Locked Bag 5000 Parramatta NSW 2124.

**Phone (General): 02 29377 6000**

## **NSW POLICE**

**Phone:**

**All Emergencies: 000**

**Non-Emergencies: 131 444**

**Crime Stoppers: 1300 333 000**

## **BIRCHTREE CENTRE – TRAUMA INFORMED THERAPISTS**

The Birchtree Centre provides support and healing for those experiencing trauma and mental health challenges.

**<https://www.birchtreecentre.com.au>**

**Phone: (02) 9518 8719**

### **Forest Lodge**

58 Parramatta Road, Forest Lodge NSW 2037

**Phone: (02) 9571 5750**

### **Pymble**

14/33 Ryde Road, Pymble NSW 2073

**Phone: (02) 8002 1073**

## **BLUE KNOT FOUNDATION**

Blue Knot provides information and support for anyone who is affected by complex trauma. Complex trauma is repeated, ongoing, and often extreme interpersonal trauma (between people) – violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation experienced as a child, young person and adult.

**<https://blueknot.org.au>**

**Phone: 1300 657 380**

**Email: [helpline@blueknot.org.au](mailto:helpline@blueknot.org.au)**

## **FULL STOP AUSTRALIA – NATIONAL SEXUAL ABUSE AND REDRESS SUPPORT SERVICE**

Offers confidential, trauma specialist counselling for people of all genders who are impacted by violence and abuse, as well as their friends, colleagues and family members.



<https://fullstop.org.au>

**Phone: Family Advocacy and Support Services (FASS): 1800 11 FASS**

**Phone: 1800 385 578**

**Phone: (02) 8585 0333**

**Fax: (02) 9555 5911**

**Post: PO Box 555 Drummoyne NSW 2047**

**Email: [info@fullstop.org.au](mailto:info@fullstop.org.au)**

#### **AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SEXUAL ASSAULT (ACSSA):**

ACSSA provides research, resources, and information on sexual assault, including the impacts and responses to sexual violence.

<https://apo.org.au>

#### **CENTRES AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT (CASA):**

CASA centres provide free, confidential counselling and support services for individuals who have experienced sexual assault. Services may include crisis intervention, counselling, and advocacy.

#### **CASA HOUSE**

3<sup>rd</sup> Floor

Queen Victoria Women's Centre

210 Lonsdale Street

Melbourne

**Phone: Counselling and Support Phone: (03) 9635 3610**

**Phone Admin Line: (03) 9635 3600**

**Facsimile: (03) 9663 9742**

**Email: [casa@thewomens.org.au](mailto:casa@thewomens.org.au)**

#### **SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICES VICTORIA (SASV)**

<https://www.sasvic.org.au>

**Phone: 1800 806 292**

**Email: [contactus@sasvic.org.au](mailto:contactus@sasvic.org.au)**

#### **SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

#### **CENTACARE SWNSW CHILD AND ADOLESCENT SEXUAL ASSAULT COUNSELLING SERVICE**

<https://centacareswsw.org.au/services/child-and-adolescent-sexual-assault-counselling-service>

Centacare SWNSW Child and Adolescent Sexual Assault Counselling Service is a free and confidential service that provides intervention tailored to children and adolescents who are victim/survivors of sexual assault and their non-perpetrating parents/carers.

Centacare SWNSW provides services to Albury, Coolamon, Corowa, Finley, Griffith, Jerilderie, Junee, Leeton, Narrandera, Mulwala, and Wagga Wagga.

Centacare can be contacted by phone or via the website Contact Form.

**Phone: 1300 619 379**

#### **KIDS HELPLINE**

Provides free 24/7 phone and online counselling service for young people.

<https://kidshelpline.com.au/>

**Phone: 1800 55 1800**

#### **E-SAFETY COMMISSIONER**

*The e-Safety* Commissioner can help individuals experiencing online bullying or abuse to take action or make a complaint in Australia.

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/contact-us>

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/young-people>

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/report>

#### **BRAVEHEARTS**

Bravehearts is an Australian child protection organisation, solely dedicated to the prevention and treatment of child sexual abuse.

<https://bravehearts.org.au/>

<https://bravehearts.org.au/get-help/>

**Phone: 1800 272 831**

#### **REACH OUT**

Reach Out Australia's services provide self-help tools so that you have information and practical steps to help you understand what's going on and how to take action.

<https://au.reachout.com>

#### **NATIONAL SEXUAL ASSAULT, DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE SERVICES**

##### **1800RESPECT**

<https://www.1800respect.org.au>

1800RESPECT is a national helpline providing confidential counselling, information, and support for individuals impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence.

**Phone: 1800 737 732**

**Text: 0458 737 732**

## **WHITE RIBBON AUSTRALIA**

White Ribbon is a global movement working to stop men's violence against women and children.

<https://www.whiteribbon.org.au>

## **OUR WATCH**

[www.ourwatch.org.au](http://www.ourwatch.org.au)

*Our Watch* is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. It does not provide emergency assistance or support services.

GPO Box 24229

Melbourne VIC 3001

<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/contact>

## **MEN'S SPECIFIC SERVICES**

### **MEN'S REFERRAL SERVICE**

Men's Referral Service provides advice for men about family violence.

<https://ntv.org.au/mrs>

Phone: 1300 766 491

### **MEN'S LINE AUSTRALIA**

Men's Line Australia supports men and boys who are dealing with family and relationship difficulties. 24/7 telephone and online support and information service for Australian men.

<https://mensline.org.au>

Phone: 1300 789 978

## **LEGAL AID SERVICES**

Various legal aid services in each state and territory can provide information and assistance regarding legal processes, including seeking justice for survivors of sexual violence.

### **LEGAL AID NSW**

Legal Aid NSW provides assistance to people who are unable to afford legal representation and access to the court system.

<https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/contact-us/our-offices>

Phone: 1300 888 529

(from 9am–5pm, Monday to Friday excluding public holidays).

Web chat: <https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/contact-us>

Legal Aid Domestic Violence Unit

<https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/my-problem-is-about/my-family-or-relationship/domestic-and-family-violence/domestic-violence-unit>

Phone: 1800 979 529

### **WOMEN'S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COURT ADVOCACY SERVICES (WDVCAS)**

WDVCAS is funded by Legal Aid NSW to provide information, assistance and *court advocacy services* to women and children experiencing *domestic violence*.

<https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/my-problem-is-about/my-family-or-relationship/domestic-and-family-violence/womens-domestic-violence-court-advocacy-services>

Phone: 1800 WDVCAS or 1800 938 227

### **SPECIALIST LEGAL AID SERVICES**

#### **REFUGEE ADVICE AND CASEWORK SERVICE (RACS)**

The Refugee Advice and Casework Service is a nonprofit providing essential legal support to people who have fled persecution to find certainty and safety in Australia.

[www.racs.org.au](http://www.racs.org.au)

Eora Country, 30 Botany St, Randwick NSW 2031

Phone Legal Help / Client Line: (02) 8355 7227

Reception Line: (02) 8317 6500

Fax: (02) 7251 1532

Email: [reception@racs.org.au](mailto:reception@racs.org.au)

#### **IMMIGRATION ADVICE AND RIGHTS CENTRE (IARC)**

The Immigration Advice and Rights Centre (IARC) is a specialist, not-for-profit community legal centre (CLC) with over 35 years' experience in migration law and policy. IARC assists migrants experiencing vulnerability in NSW by providing free legal information, advice, and casework services.

<https://iarc.org.au>

Suite 3, Level 8

377-383 Sussex Street

Sydney, NSW, 2000

Phone: Info line: (02) 8234 0700

Domestic Violence Priority Line: (02) 8234 0777

Email: [info@iarc.org.au](mailto:info@iarc.org.au)

## **WOMEN'S LEGAL SERVICE NSW**

*Women's Legal Service NSW does not provide legal advice by email. Confidential information about the substance of a matter should not be given by email as it is not possible for WLS NSW to protect any confidential information provided. For legal advice please call their legal advice lines.*

Office hours: Monday–Friday: 9am–1pm and 2pm–4.30pm

<https://www.wlsnsw.org.au>

PO Box 206, Lidcombe NSW 1825

**Phone: (02) 8745 6900,**

**Fax: (02) 9749 4433**

For the Telephone Interpreter Service **131 450** and ask them to call Women's Legal NSW on **(02) 8745 6900**. They will connect you to a solicitor for legal advice.

**Email: [reception@wlsnsw.org.au](mailto:reception@wlsnsw.org.au)**

## **FORCED MARRIAGE**

### **MY BLUE SKY**

My Blue Sky is a national service run by Anti-Slavery Australia for people who are in a forced marriage or worried about being forced to marry.

<https://www.mybluesky.org.au/>

**Phone: 02 9514 8115**

**SMS: +61 481 070 844**

**Email: [help@mybluesky.org.au](mailto:help@mybluesky.org.au)**

## **TRAFFICKING AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION**

### **ANTI-SLAVERY AUSTRALIA**

Anti-Slavery Australia is the only specialist centre providing free legal and migration services to people who have experienced or are at risk of modern slavery in Australia.

<https://antislavery.org.au>

**Phone: +612 9514 9660**

**Email: [antislavery@uts.edu.au](mailto:antislavery@uts.edu.au)**

### **Anti-Slavery Legal Practice**

**Phone: +612 9514 8115**

**Email: [ASALegal@uts.edu.au](mailto:ASALegal@uts.edu.au)**

## **AUSTRALIAN RED CROSS**

**Australian Red Cross: Support for Trafficked People Program**

**<https://www.redcross.org.au/migration/support-for-trafficked-people/>**

**Phone: 1800 113 015**

**Email: [national\\_stpp@redcross.org.au](mailto:national_stpp@redcross.org.au)**

## **THE SALVATION ARMY**

**The Salvation Army Trafficking and Slavery Safe House**

**<https://www.salvationarmy.org.au/>**

**Phone: 1300 473 560 or 1800 000 277**

**Email: [endslavery@salvationarmy.org.au](mailto:endslavery@salvationarmy.org.au)**

## **AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE (AFP)**

**<https://www.afp.gov.au/crimes/human-trafficking-and-people-smuggling/human-trafficking-and-slavery>**

**Phone: 131 237**

## **GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS**

**Support for Trafficked People Program (STPP)**

**<https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/anti-people-trafficking-strategy/support-for-trafficked-people-program>**

## **LGBTIQA+ COUNSELLING AND/OR SUPPORT SERVICES**

### **ACON**

ACON is NSW's leading HIV and LGBTQ+ health organisation.

**[www.acon.org.au](http://www.acon.org.au)**

**Sydney 414 Elizabeth Street Surry Hills, NSW 2010**

**Phone: 02 9206 2000**

**Email: [acon@acon.org.au](mailto:acon@acon.org.au)**

**Northern Rivers Suite 4P Conway Court, Lismore, NSW 2480**

**Phone: 02 6622 1555**

**Email: [northernrivers@acon.org.au](mailto:northernrivers@acon.org.au)**

### **Hunter (Hunter, New England, Central Coast, Central West)**

129 Maitland Road

Islington, NSW 2296

**Phone: 02 49627700**

**Email: [hunter@acon.org.au](mailto:hunter@acon.org.au)**

### **Southern, Far West & Blue Mountains**

**Phone: 1800 063 060 / 02 9206 2114**

**Email: [regionaloutreach@acon.org.au](mailto:regionaloutreach@acon.org.au)**

### **KIRKETON ROAD CENTRE**

The Kirketon Road Centre is a health care service that provides free and anonymous care to people who experience barriers to accessing health care. South-Eastern Sydney Local Health District ([nsw.gov.au](http://nsw.gov.au))

**Phone: (02) 9360 2766**

**Fax: (02) 9360 5154**

### **QLIFE**

**[www.qlife.org.au](http://www.qlife.org.au)**

**Phone: 1800 184 527**

Webchat available between 3pm and midnight

**<https://qlife.org.au/resources/chat>**

### **RAINBOW FAMILIES**

'Rainbow Families' supports, connects, celebrates, empowers, and advocates for LGBTQ+ parents and their families at every stage of their lives. Rainbow Families serves as an important voice for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, diverse and queer (LGBTQ+) parents and their children.

**[www.rainbowfamilies.com.au](http://www.rainbowfamilies.com.au)**

PO BOX 306, Erskineville NSW 2043

**Phone: 0481 565 958**

**[https://www.rainbowfamilies.com.au/contact\\_us](https://www.rainbowfamilies.com.au/contact_us)**

**ASYLUM- SEEKERS CENTRE LGBTIQA+ peer-group (for people seeking asylum only)**

**<https://asylumseekerscentre.org.au>**

The Asylum Seekers Centre is a place of welcome and support. The ASC provides practical help for people seeking asylum in Greater Sydney and advocate for fair and humane policies for refugees and people seeking asylum.

**Phone: (02) 9078 1900**

**Hours: Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm**

Address

43 Bedford Street  
Newtown, NSW 2042

Address

44A Macquarie Road  
Auburn, NSW 2144

**Hours: Wednesdays, 10am to 3pm**



# SOME RESOURCES THAT CAN HELP

## Care Package for Survivors of Sexual Trauma

By Sexual Assault Resource Centre (Government of Western Australia)

<https://www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/~media/HSPs/NMHS/Hospitals/WNHS/Documents/Patients-resources/SARC---Care-Package-for-Survivors-of-Sexual-Trauma.pdf>

## NSW Health Education Centre Against Violence

The ECAV provides useful resources to assist victims of sexual assault, their families and communities. These publications are available to download free of charge.

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/parvan/sexualassault/Pages/sexual-assault-resources.aspx>

<https://www.ecav.health.nsw.gov.au/Resources/Resource-Shop/booklets>

## “Torture Therapy: Giving Survivors Their Lives Back”

YouTube SBS The Feed

This documentary provides an inspirational view into the lives of survivors of sexual violence in conflict and the truly remarkable professionals who help them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29dbH3TXIQs>

## “Re-Regulated: Set Your Life Free From Childhood PTSD and Trauma-Driven Behaviours that Keep You Stuck” by Anna Runkle (2024) Hay House LLC.

In Re-Regulated, author Anna Runkle provides practical techniques, worksheets and prompts to calm triggers, break out of isolation, and help change the self-defeating behaviours that are so common for people who have experienced trauma and complex trauma.

## “What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing” by Bruce. D Perry and Oprah Winfrey

Oprah Winfrey and trauma expert, Dr Bruce Perry, discuss the impact of trauma and adverse experiences – and how healing must begin with a shift to asking ‘What happened to you?’

## “The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse” by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis

The Courage to Heal is a comprehensive guide that offers hope and a map of the healing journey to women who were sexually abused as children and their loved ones.

## **“Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering from Sexual Child Abuse” by Mike Lew and Ellen Bass**

The first book written specifically for men, *Victims No Longer* examines the changing cultural attitudes toward male survivors of incest and other sexual trauma. This book offers compassionate and practical advice, supported by personal anecdotes and statements of male survivors. *Victims No Longer* helps male survivors to:

- \* Identify and validate their childhood experiences
- \* Explore strategies of survival and healing
- \* Work through issues such as trust, intimacy, and sexual confusion
- \* Establish a support network for continued personal recovery
- \* Make choices that aren't determined by abuse

Psychotherapist Mike Lew has worked with thousands of men and women in their healing from the effects of childhood sexual abuse, rape, physical violence, emotional abuse, and neglect. His book contains invaluable strategies for, particularly for men, on recovering from incest and other abuse.

## SOME USEFUL WEBSITES

### **NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)**

Hints For Healing

<https://www.hintsforhealing.startts.org.au>

### **NSW Health Education Centre Against Violence**

A wide range of resources for survivors and relevant professionals.

<https://www.ecav.health.nsw.gov.au>

### **Women's Legal Resource Service NSW**

Ask LOIS is a free legal online information service provided by Women's Legal Service NSW.

<https://vimeo.com/asklois>

### **E-Safety Commissioner**

*The e-Safety Commissioner can help individuals experiencing online bullying or abuse to take action or make a complaint in Australia.*

<https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/contact-us>