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**A SNAPSHOT OF ADULT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SECONDARY  
VICTIMISATION WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES FOLLOWING  
SEXUAL VICTIMISATION\*****Leandri Swanepoel<sup>1</sup> and Laetitia Coetzee<sup>2</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article presents narratives of adult women sexual offence survivors who were subjected to secondary victimisation within their communities. Previous South African research on secondary victimisation focused primarily on the criminal justice system (CJS). The current qualitative study employed availability sampling, and the semi-structured interviews were analysed by means of thematic data analysis. Findings related to the participants' experiences of societal secondary victimisation included the dismissal or denial of victims' experiences, minimisation of the victimisation experience, apathy, disempowering reactions, stigmatisation, ostracism, and overt victim blaming. These experiences gave rise to adverse emotional effects, which were internalised and developed into negative internal narratives, which, in turn, manifested in various adverse behavioural outcomes, such as learned helplessness. Many survivors reported that they either ceased disclosing their victimisation or considered doing so, particularly those engaged in the pursuit of justice within the CJS. Measures that were proposed in the reduction of societal secondary victimisation include awareness and education.*

**Keywords:** *Female victims; gender-based violence; rape; secondary victimisation; sexual assault; sexual offence.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Sexual victimisation in South Africa has elicited international concern, as some even refer to the country as the global rape capital (Mamabolo, Lekgau & Maluleke, 2022: 87–90). Moreover, the traumatic nature of sexual offences gives rise to the fact that the large majority of survivors have extensive and delicate post-assault needs insofar as the services of the criminal justice system (CJS) and societal support structures are concerned (Patterson & Tringali, 2015: 1987–1988, 1990–1991). Sexual offences perpetrated against women are distinct from many alternative forms of victimisation that women are often expected not only to bear the burden proving that an offence did, in fact, occur, but also to disprove any implication of their own responsibility in its occurrence (Ahrens, 2006: 270). As such, literature maintains that many survivors of sexual offences, while already processing existing trauma and deliberating the potential pitfalls of disclosing their primary victimisation to authorities or trusted individuals, experience negative reactions that may be categorised under the broad criteria of secondary victimisation (Fohring, 2020: 1–2). Negative reactions, whether malicious (e.g., negative attitudes and assertions regarding sexual victimisation) or unintentional (e.g., lack of awareness or misperceptions of 'helpful' responses), may compound the adverse effects of the trauma (Brown, 2019: 208–209). However, there is a particular lack of South African research focusing on the secondary victimisation experienced by survivors of sexual offences within their communities. This gap in the literature prompted the researchers

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to undertake a study aimed at exploring and describing this phenomenon, with a previously neglected emphasis on occurrences within a societal context.

The study posed the following research question: What are the experiences of adult women victims of sexual offences who were subjected to secondary victimisation within the broader societal context? The overarching aim of the study was, therefore, to explore the experiences of adult women victims of sexual offences who were subjected to secondary victimisation within their communities.

Participants in the current study highlighted several forms of secondary victimisation that have not been addressed in previous South African research, such as the dismissal of the victims' accounts, exploitation by organisations that were supposed to assist them, and apathy or annoyance from the individuals responsible for their secondary victimisation. When victims who speak out are subjected to secondary victimisation, some often cease disclosure of their experiences and resort to remaining silent. Moreover, the severe impact of the secondary victimisation of survivors may even be described by some as being the equivalent of a second assault as it may, for some, perpetuate the emotional implications of the initial traumatic experience (Campbell, 2008: 702–703).

Subsequent to the discussion of the study at hand, a brief overview of the theoretical framework underpinning the research is provided.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The study's theoretical framework comprises the following: the socio-structural perspective, the feminist perspectives, the learned helplessness theory, and Amir's patterns of forcible rape perspective.

### **Socio-structural perspective**

According to the socio-structural perspective, victimisation is ultimately the result of the broader power structures within society that place pressure on disenfranchised groups. Individuals who may be deemed marginalised or powerless within these structures are often characterised, to some extent, by relative deprivation and limited opportunities. The burden of such pressure is, therefore, considered to be a significant risk factor in the probability of victimisation, with marginalised groups disproportionately affected (Peacock, 2019: 36). The aforementioned assertions also become evident when reviewing literature on the secondary victimisation of rape survivors. When survivors disclose their experiences in an attempt to gain support or assistance, the likelihood of being subjected to secondary victimisation is often influenced by socio-structural factors. Women survivors of rape from a lower socio-economic class are also less likely to receive the support of the CJS when they approach public officials for assistance. The rape cases of such marginalised groups are also less likely to end in convictions as the CJS often rejects their cases (Campbell, 2008: 703–704).

One may, therefore, also argue that being a woman in a patriarchal society qualifies as being a member of a marginalised group that bears the burden of society's formal and informal power structures and the resulting lack of opportunities. Women are placed into certain roles with corresponding expectations regarding their behaviour and what are considered to be their duties (Spengler, 2013: 30). The various societal notions regarding the roles of women will, however, be discussed more extensively in light of the feminist perspectives of victimisation. Essentially, it becomes evident that the power structures within society may place rape survivors who are considered to have less power and status at a higher risk of secondary victimisation.

### **Feminist perspectives of victimisation**

Feminist research in areas such as sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence, in particular, leans primarily towards issues pertaining to social relations (especially those that make reference to gender) (Mason & Stubbs, 2010: 2). As such, the feminist perspectives of victimisation consider the risk of victimisation within the context of a patriarchal society and the positions in which women are placed within such a society. According to the socio-cultural perspective, women are placed into roles of submission and inferiority by the patriarchal figures that attempt to dominate them (Peacock, 2019: 36). Feminist perspectives maintain that victimisation is an unfortunate outcome of the institutionalised patriarchal structures that are often used to morally justify the victimisation of women (Jasinski, 2001: 12). According to feminist perspectives, women are, in essence, considered to be objects at the disposal of patriarchal figures who exert control over them. The victimisation of women is, therefore, considered a patriarchal norm that serves as a means of regulating or chastising them in an attempt to encourage their adherence to such norms (Spengler, 2013: 28).

As a result, the rape of women, as a violent offence against the body of women, is also deemed a manner in which women are violently encouraged to remain within the boundaries of their traditionally defined roles. The aforementioned view is especially prominent within the bounds of radical feminism, which is one of the major schools of thought within feminism. Feminist perspectives are, however, not only concerned with the initial victimisation of women but also grant consideration to the diverse institutional responses to such matters by institutions (Burgess-Proctor, 2006: 29). The assertions of feminist perspectives will, therefore, be reviewed with reference to a uniquely South African perspective.

South African society is, as illustrated within the feminist perspective, still riddled with notions of gender inequalities and imbalances in gendered power structures, despite the many developments regarding the emancipation of women in the country. As a result, patriarchal beliefs regarding the distinct roles of males and women still serve as influential contributors to many forms of victimisation to which women are subjected. Many forms of violence against women are, therefore, described as ways in which men assert their dominance and masculinity across many different social contexts (Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002: 1238–1239). Men are often considered, within the patriarchal margins of society, to be entitled to their so-called sexual initiative, and women are, conversely, expected to be compliant, as it is, in some cases, considered their duty. On the other hand, women who are placed in traditional roles are expected to be modest and reserved in their sexual encounters. Women who are sexually victimised are often deemed promiscuous and burdened with various stigmatising labels linked to persistent myths about sexual offences that still pervade society (Ahrens, 2006: 30–31). Attempts by these women to disclose their experiences are, therefore, viewed as attempts to assert themselves, as their voices grant them some authority over their own experiences. As a result, silencing such women may be considered a means of ensuring their submission to the patriarchal inclinations of their communities and reinforcing the powerless roles in which they are placed. The secondary victimisation of survivors who attempt to disclose their experiences may serve such purposes, as it is very often a large contributor to their continued silence (Ahrens, 2006: 263).

In this regard, the danger of over-emphasising the role of feminist perspectives in the victimisation of women, to such an extent that other possibly applicable theories are overlooked, is emphasised. This effect may also be more far-reaching as the risk of over-emphasis may further enforce the perception of women as victims instead of survivors or even as perpetrators. Incessantly portraying women as powerless victims of a patriarchal society may, therefore, have adverse effects on the feministic attempts aimed at casting women in an equal, independent, and empowered light (Davies, 2011: 100). Radical feminism, therefore, challenges this portrayal and seeks to reclaim women's power and agency over their own

sexuality, as opposed to the subordinate roles historically cast onto women. Women's sexuality is celebrated in line with this as a consensual act (Butler, 2015: 116–117).

### **Learned helplessness theory**

The learned helplessness theory (originally formulated by Martin Seligman) presents a clarification of victims' responses to environments of victimisation in which the victim specifically experiences a material or perceived lack of control within the environment. The theory is, therefore, particularly helpful in providing explanations for the passivity of victims in harmful environments that are considered uncontrollable, especially where such exposure is prolonged (such as abusive domestic environments) (Peacock, 2019: 38). This passivity is ascribed to the victim's prolonged exposure to inescapable harm, from which the victim learns that the outcome within this environment is independent from their response. Thus, the element of control is considered the core construct within this dynamic as the victim learns that their response (i.e. what they can control) has no consequential effect on the outcome (i.e., the harmful external stimuli outside of their control). As such, being rendered helpless with no means of exerting control over their circumstances, the victim resorts to a passive non-response that may even result in psychological paralysis (Mohanty, Pradhan & Jena, 2015: 885–886). This learned helplessness will subsequently be extended to the broader context of the victim's lived experience where the victim may exhibit a similar passive response in harmful environments (whether perceived or material) even in situations where the victim does have control over the outcome (Peacock, 2019: 39). A converse reaction is also proposed in some cases where victims might respond with maladaptive empowerment strategies instead of passivity (such as perpetuating the harmful behaviour, passive-aggressive behaviour, or abuse towards others) (Mohanty et al., 2015: 891; Peacock, 2019: 39).

The learned helplessness theory may, therefore, find applicability within the context of the sexual victimisation of women, as well as the potential ensuing secondary victimisation, where the victimisation occurs on a repeated or prolonged basis. Women who have been sexually victimised may experience a decreased motivation to respond or resist the situation, resorting to a passive withdrawal (such as ceasing disclosure of their experience or not seeking further support). Subsequently, this passivity in the experience of secondary victimisation may lead victims to refrain from reporting their victimisation to authorities, having internalised the secondary victimisation experienced from those they initially confided in. The belief that they cannot influence the outcome by means of their response may, in turn, be extended to broader areas of their lived experience and materialise in other aspects of their lives (such as relations with loved ones). This application of the theory has, however, received criticism for its failure to address contextual factors such as social, cultural, and economic aspects, which may have bearing on the dynamics of the theory or the decision of women to remain passive in harmful structures, environments or situations (Peacock, 2019: 39).

### **Amir's patterns of forcible rape perspective**

Amir (1968) contended that, in cases of forcible rape, sexual victimisation may be considered 'precipitated' by various behavioural factors, although the victimisation befalls the victim without their cooperation or their aid. The behavioural factors are explicitly distinguished from provocation and, instead, refers to common misperceptions surrounding rape (such as accepting a drink or ride, indecent language/gestures, and failing to object 'strongly enough' to sexual advances). It is, therefore, purported that behaviour that is commonly regarded by society as contradictory to the gender roles and commonly held expectations of 'appropriate female behaviour' may result in society wrongfully considering the woman 'sexually available'. As such, regardless of the logic, intention or truth behind her behaviour, individuals (including potential perpetrators) who hold such misperceptions may interpret it as a sign of sexual

availability (Amir, 1968: 493–494). Therefore, the term ‘victim precipitation’, which arises within this context, encompasses situations of sexual offences in which the victim is deemed to have ‘agreed’ to the sexual act. Moreover, according to individuals harbouring these beliefs, this ‘perceived agreement’ is then retracted prior to the act and perceived by these individuals as ‘insufficient’ resistance. The ‘precipitating factors’ that may lead purveyors of these notions to insinuate ‘sexual availability’ include the following (Amir, 1968: 495, 502):

- The consumption of alcohol prior to victimisation (particularly in the case of the victim);
- A negative reputation of the victim (e.g., the victim’s sexual history);
- Victims who reside in close proximity to the perpetrator;
- The setting in which the victim meets the perpetrator (e.g., parties or establishments such as bars);
- Victimisation occurring in close proximity to, or inside, the perpetrator’s place of residence;
- The use of coercive tactics to subdue a victim instead of violence (resulting in perceived ‘insufficient resistance’); and
- An existing victim–offender relationship (e.g., where the perpetrator is known to the victim).

Amir’s perspective, therefore, proposes that secondary victimisation may originate from commonly held notions or ‘rape myths’ applied to women within the society in which they reside. Individuals may attribute accountability or blame to victims who disclose their experiences of sexual victimisation based on the perceived ‘precipitating factors’ that, according to those perpetrating the secondary victimisation, constituted consent or partial responsibility for the occurrence. In the current study, the perspective lends itself to the application of these assertions to sexual offences perpetrated by known persons or involving less violent coercive tactics (including incidents where victims were unable to consent). Due to the perceived non-violent nature of the incident, those engaging in secondary victimisation may deny that a sexual offence occurred altogether, citing common misperceptions about rape—such as that the survivor did not resist ‘strongly enough’. More commonly, however, rape myths are cited to ‘legitimise’ the attribution of blame to the survivor (i.e., insinuating that she was ‘asking for it’ or ‘implying consent’ by behaving in what they deem an inappropriate manner). For example, a woman who is sexually victimised by a known person on their way to his place of residence following a night out together might face scrutiny for being intoxicated and accepting drinks from the person. Additionally, she may be accused of leading him on due to their existing relationship, and the proximity to his place of residence may be perceived as a ‘precipitating factor’ as she was going home with him.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In the current study, a qualitative approach and a descriptive case study design were employed, which allowed for a detailed and holistic description, analysis, and interpretation of the phenomenon by examining a small number of instances of the phenomenon. This is particularly effective in the production of new literature or theory as it generates theoretical insights that are intrinsically rooted in the lived experiences of individuals (Schurink, Schurink & Fouché, 2021: 302). The qualitative research approach was informed by an interpretivism paradigm to understand the subjective perspectives of the research participants (Sefotho, 2021: 6). Inductive thematic analysis, according to the phases proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013: 122–123), was used to identify and analyse patterns in the data derived from the qualitative interviews and to identify categories.

## Sample

Participants were selected using a non-probability sampling approach (availability sampling). A social worker who counsels women who have experienced sexual offences was approached by the researcher. The social worker identified and contacted potential participants who had been subjected to secondary victimisation and explored their willingness to participate in the study. Nine adult women who had experienced sexual offences and subsequent secondary victimisation volunteered to take part. The participants, all women, ranged in age from 23 to 55 and came from diverse occupational backgrounds. Each was assigned a pseudonym, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Demographics of the research participants**

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Occupation
Participant 1	Emma	47	Self-employed (Embroiderer)
Participant 2	Meg	42	Self-employed (Florist)
Participant 3	Marmee	51	Financial adviser
Participant 4	Amy	23	Teacher
Participant 5	Beth	48	Administration manager
Participant 6	Jo	26	Pharmacist's assistant
Participant 7	Olivia	55	Small business owner
Participant 8	Charlotte	51	Part-time employee at auctions; Part-time entrepreneur
Participant 9	Laura	26	Marketing administrator at debt collector

## Instruments and data collection procedures

A semi-structured interview schedule consisting of 17 questions was used to explore various aspects of the participants' experiences of secondary victimisation. These included nine questions focusing on the nature of the secondary victimisation; four questions on the personal effects and implications for healing; three questions on the role of secondary victimisation in ceased disclosure; and one question on potential measures to reduce and/or prevent secondary victimisation. This format allowed the researcher to guide the structure of the interview with the aid of the participant responses (Geyer, 2021: 358).

In-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher and, with the consent of the participants, were captured by means of audio recordings and the researcher's field notes. The duration of the interviews was approximately one and a half hours per research participant.

## Data analysis

The data gathered from the research participants during the semi-structured interviews were transcribed, whereafter the authors applied Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Following transcription, the authors familiarised themselves with the content. Subsequently, emergent themes and categories were identified within the transcripts. The various categories and themes that emerged from the thematic content were then interpreted, and patterns identified, allowing for the final phase of appropriately representing the data (Schurink et al., 2021: 401–412).

## Limitations of the study

Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the use of non-probability sampling, the findings are not generalisable to the broader population. It is important to note, however, that the study did not seek to generalise findings but rather focused on the unique narratives and in-depth

accounts of the respective research participants. Furthermore, a very small sample size was used in the study. The limited sample was due to various factors, including the sensitive nature of the phenomenon. Although the researcher contacted many organisations and distributed brochures to individuals who met the sampling criteria, access to participants was only successful at one organisation. The research was also conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and despite efforts by the researcher to organise online interviews and accommodate participants, only nine agreed to partake in the study. Nevertheless, despite the sample size limitation, the intensive data collection method employed in this study provided rich and detailed insights into societal secondary victimisation of adult women victims of sexual offences, and data saturation was reached.

An additional limitation that should be granted due consideration is that the participants were exclusively Afrikaans, Caucasian women, which was a departure from the originally envisaged sample according to which the theoretical framework was formulated. Future studies could build upon this explorative study by recruiting a larger and more representative sample.

### **Ethical considerations**

Research ethics remained central to the research process, with careful consideration given to voluntary participation through informed consent, confidentiality, and the avoidance of harm. After each interview, the researcher conducted individual debriefing sessions with the research participants to discuss their experiences and how responding to the questions and their participation in the interview may have affected them. If any research participants experienced distress, a social worker was available to provide trauma debriefing and/or counselling. Participants were informed that they could stop the session at any time if they were in need of debriefing, and they were free to withdraw from the study without any negative consequences. In this study, however, none of the participants chose to withdraw.

### **RESULTS**

Following the transcription of the audio recordings obtained during the interviews, the participants' narratives were arranged into themes and sub-themes and translated from Afrikaans to English. A discussion of these themes, with reference to corresponding verbatim extracts from the participant narratives, will follow.

#### **Theme 1: Secondary victimisation within society**

This section will expound the types of secondary victimisation experienced by survivors within society that were revealed throughout the course of the study, namely: the dismissal/denial of the victim's experience, minimising the victim's experience and apathy, disempowering victims, stigmatising victims, and overt victim blaming.

##### ***Sub-theme 1.1: Dismissal/denial of the victim's experience***

An overt dismissal of the participants' experiences of victimisation, either by community members or loved ones, occurred in various forms, the first being the disbelief of the participant's account, which was highlighted by Emma: "*One told me directly, 'You're talking shit,<sup>1</sup> it didn't happen; I was also in that house.'*" Similarly, Jo stated: "*An-n-nd the grandmother, his mother, just said, 'You're lying, you're lying, you—you're lying to me, you, you're making up these stories because you don't want to stay here anymore. You're lying, you're a liar.'*"

The second, more indirect, form of dismissing the participants' experiences entails insinuating that participants are using the victimisation as an excuse, a cry for attention, or that they merely misunderstood the perpetrator's intentions. In this regard, Olivia stated: "*And do you know—do you know what they—what they, uhm, what people always say? 'Oh, he's just*

playing with you. '[pause]. You know what? Then I want to do something to them, because that's not true."

Participants who reported experiencing the types of secondary victimisation under this theme were subjected to such responses by their spouses and relatives over a prolonged period. Conversely, Marmee experienced several once-off occurrences of such dismissals from members of her community in public settings upon being recognised due to the widely publicised court proceedings in her case. Even though Brooks-Hay, Burman, and Bradley (2019: np) refer to the dismissal of survivors' experiences within the bounds of the CJS, not much evidence is provided of this theme in a societal context. Ahrens (2006: 269–270) does, however, refer broadly to 'ineffective disclosures' within the context of the CJS, as well as communities, in which the survivor's disclosure fails to result in support.

### **Sub-theme 1.2: Minimising the victim's experience and apathy**

A theme that relates closely to dismissing the victim's experience in its entirety is that of minimising the experience by dismissing the magnitude of the implications for the victim overtly (Ahrens, 2006: 269). Some of the participants in the study illustrated how loved ones invalidated their feelings and experiences by, for example, instructing the participant to merely 'get over it' (Emma) or, as Amy described: "*Well the third person I told then first told me HER experience. [pause] So, then she made her case bigger than mine.*"

Apathy was, furthermore, explicitly observed in the findings as overtly 'brushing off' a victim's experience and, therefore, failing to provide the victim with support. While the literature does not confirm this within a broader societal sphere, acknowledgement has been given to the indifference, unresponsiveness, and 'distracted' manner in which officials within the CJS respond to victims' accounts (Brooks-Hay et al., 2019: np; Sebaeng, Davhana-Maselesele & Manyedi, 2016: 4). The current study, therefore, provides a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge by presenting insight into the apathy experienced by victims in a societal context. This is particularly evident in Amy's recollection: "*I would say she didn't know how to react [...]. So, she turned it away. She, like, just rejected it almost. [...] Said like, 'Okay, whatever, let's just move on.' Yes.*" Similar sentiments were reflected by Charlotte: "*[Pause] Yes, that part isn't for him—yes. For him it's a, whatever. It's a point for him to throw a stone at me. [Sigh] Yes.*"

### **Sub-theme 1.3: Annoyance**

Another sub-theme that surfaced was annoyance, displayed by the person who subjected the victim to secondary victimisation. This made the participant feel as though the disclosure inconvenienced the trusted individual. Charlotte described her husband's annoyance as follows:

*"'Oh, uhm, are you using that again now?' [imitates husband's annoyance] Understand? Because it also has an impact on your marriage, on your sex life. [sniffles] Uhm, ... so then when I say yes, but I'm working on it, then oh, okay, yes. 'You've been working on it for a while' [imitates husband's annoyance]. But—do you understand? The, it's, you work on it, but you never get it right. Ag, the other day he said, 'Ag, you were with [your counsellor] and it didn't help our marriage at all'".*

While this is not explicitly confirmed by literature, research refers to the insistence of particularly relatives to not speak about the experience of sexual victimisation in cases perpetrated by known individuals (Hogan, Emmelin, Lindmark, Massawe, Nystrom & Axemo, 2009: 607). Research conducted by Sebaeng et al. (2016: 4) examined the experiences of victims at designated Thuthuzela Care Centres.<sup>2</sup> They noted the 'negative attitudes' with which

services were rendered to victims. The current study, therefore, provides a unique contribution to the current body of knowledge in this regard by presenting insight into the annoyance displayed by those committing secondary victimisation in a societal context.

#### ***Sub-theme 1.4: Disempowering the victim***

A manner in which victims are often unintentionally disempowered is when potentially well-meaning individuals attempt to assist the survivor in ways that the survivor experiences as invasive and/or harmful. Spengler (2013: 93–94) notes that such attempts may even be considered discriminatory, as they unintentionally stigmatise the survivor upon disclosure. Participants in previous research have described these inappropriate forms of support as overall unhelpful (Ahrens, 2006: 269). This unintentionally harmful response is reflected in the current findings, where Amy described loved ones responding to the disclosure by forcefully or inappropriately attempting to assist her to her emotional detriment:

*“They reacted very strongly about it, and they wanted to act IMMEDIATELY because she also has social work experience. ... So that reaction scared me because it ... jeopardised the relationship I still had with the person—with my father. Because they immediately wanted to take legal action. ... And then it was PROPERLY scratched open again, and everyone wants—they want to lay charges and protect the community. And are there other victims? And all these things I hadn’t even thought of. So, I would say it was negative for me—it was bad for me. And I think [my fiancé] could see it too”.*

Such unwanted assistance, albeit rooted in the good intentions of loved ones, renders the survivor powerless in their own pursuit of healing and reclaiming control over the primary disempowerment that was experienced during the initial victimisation. A more overt and directly degrading form of this disempowering behaviour was, however, noted in Amy’s account, where her abuser made her engage in discussions pertaining to the primary sexual victimisation in order to ‘resolve’ their accountability.

#### ***Sub-theme 1.5: Stigmatising and ostracising the victim***

Survivors of sexual offences are very often either directly or indirectly stigmatised in various ways by members of their communities who foster misconceptions about sexual offences. This frequently leads to direct labelling of survivors, with a common form being the intentional attachment of overtly labelling of the survivor (Spengler, 2013: 93–94). Consistent with this, the current study found many ways in which some participants were openly subjected to stigmatisation, labelling, gossip, rejection, and ostracism. Examples of gossip included family talking behind a participant’s back and asking her at social events if she knew she had been sexually victimised, as the participant’s husband revealed this to them (Olivia). Labelling and stigmatisation involved branding a participant as “*the woman who was raped*” (Marmee) and indicating that they “*view the participant differently*” (Amy); some even expressed pity or called the participant a “*whore*” (Charlotte and Olivia). Lastly, rejection and ostracism took forms such as refusing to work professionally with a participant due to “*not knowing how to enter a conversation with her*” (Marmee); rejecting a participant at church and asking if she had seen the latest news about her case in newspapers (Marmee); and ‘writing off’ a participant in a letter from the family, suggesting she should have been killed during the victimisation instead of her son (Marmee).

#### ***Sub-theme 1.6: Overt victim blaming***

Women are frequently burdened with the expectation to prove that they were neither responsible for nor complicit in their sexual victimisation, while also carrying the onus of proving that the offence occurred at all (Ahrens, 2006: 270). As such, blaming or holding the

survivor accountable remains a persistent and prominent theme of secondary victimisation experienced by those who disclose their victimisation (Spengler, 2013: 84–86). In the current study, a few participants reported experiencing explicit or overt forms of victim blaming. Marmee recalls her experiences of overt victim blaming within her community:

*“Look, some of them would have made the remark, I, it, I deserved what happened to me. ... Uhm-m, I honestly think no human being deserves such a thing. ... Uhm, no matter if you are or have been WHATEVER in your life, ... NO human being deserves that. ... Uhm-mm, I was made out as the half woman of [town’s name]. ... Uhm-mm, what else was there? It was basically those two crude things that— [trails off]. [clears throat] ... No, it was only once-off from him, the doctor, because I never went back to him again. Uhm-mm, community-wise, it was quite a bomb that exploded in my heart that Saturday here [at the counsellor] when [my friend] told me someone just made a comment last week—just last week ... that I deserved what happened to me. [Long pause] REALLY? [gestures] [pause]”.*

Furthermore, this particular form of secondary victimisation has been described as especially common in cases of sexual victimisation perpetrated by an individual that is known to the victim, as is the case in the current study (Spengler, 2013: 84–86). This aligns with the experience of Amy, whose father (the abuser) accused her of initiating the victimisation as a child in order to absolve his own accountability and dissuade disclosure: *“Oh yes, and he told me, ‘AND THEN YOU ... did this to me,’ and THEN he did [insinuating that she initiated the behaviour as a child].”*

## **Theme 2: The effects of secondary victimisation**

The effects of the secondary victimisation that were observed throughout the findings of the study presented three interrelated areas of interest that formed a cycle. First, the survivor experienced the emotional impact of the secondary victimisation. Then, they internalised these experiences, reinforcing or perpetuating the sentiments of the experience within themselves. This, in turn, resulted in behavioural manifestations of the internalised notions (e.g., maladaptive coping strategies such as passivity or acting out). These behaviours lead to further negative engagements with the person who had subjected them to secondary victimisation (Ullman, Relyea, Sigurvinsdottir & Bennett, 2017: 1096–1098).

### ***Sub-theme 2.1: Emotional effect on victims***

Several emotional responses such as anger, self-doubt, difficulty trusting, shame, dissociation or numbing, denying their own reality, suicidal ideations, depression and/or anxiety were expressed by participants in the current study subsequent to the secondary victimisation. Studies conducted by Ahrens (2006) and Campbell (2008) support the severity of the emotional and psychological implications for such survivors and cite depression, suicidality, doubting their own experience, shame or self-blame, and distrust as common emotional responses. Jo also explicitly illustrates these emotions in her elaboration:

*“[Pause] Emotional. ... ALL your emotions come up. [Pause] EVERYTHING. And you can’t help it. You can do ... WHATEVER YOU WANT. ... The only emotion that does not come out that day is happiness. ... That’s it. You show no sign of happiness. You feel dead. You feel scared. You feel sad. You feel ANGRY. You feel IRRITATED. [Pause] All in one. ... It puts so much stress on you [inhales sharply], uhm, ... but emotionally, ... EVERYTHING comes out. ... EVERYTHING comes out”.*

A similar range of emotions was described by Amy:

*“I was ABSOLUTELY completely unable to function. I just did not want to do anything. I was angry, I was sad, I was disappointed. [Pause] But, [pause] I think if it wasn't for [my fiancé], I don't know where I would be, ... because at such a point, it's been so many times now that one tries to just get past the—this—all this crap. A-a-and it was just the final blow this time. So, no, I'm not okay at all, but systematically, after seeing [my counsellor] again, when I started to see things clearly again, she has a way of making things logical for me. I am always HE-E-ERE [gestures] and THE-E-ERE”.*

Anger, which is not commonly cited in literature as being part of the emotional reaction of victims presented as a particularly prominent emotional response expressed by all of the participants in the current study. Marmee recounted her experience as follows:

*“So, uhm, and I just want to tell you, and that's one thing I think any ... victim, I was there, jissie, I did not go to church for about eighteen months. ... Because you're angry with the Lord; you're angry with everyone. ... Uhm, those emotions are bubbl-, then the pastor is preaching up there about everything, but here inside of you it's BOILING”.*

### **Sub-theme 2.2: Internalisation and re-enforcement of secondary victimisation**

Many participants normalised and internalised the secondary victimisation they experienced, thereby perpetuating its sentiments within themselves. Research by Ahrens (2006: 270) highlights the self-blame that survivors reported as a result of secondary victimisation. Carson, Babad, Brown, Brumbaugh, Castillo and Nikulina (2020: 281–282) specifically identified four categories of internalised beliefs held by non-disclosing survivors of sexual victimisation: 1) shame, 2) minimising the offence, 3) fear of consequences, and 4) privacy. Moreover, the internalisation of negative characterological and behavioural beliefs (such as self-blame) may be influenced by survivor-specific factors, including a history of childhood sexual abuse, or being intoxicated at the time of victimisation (Donde, 2017: 1672–1673).

Consequently, negative inner dialogue, internalised stigmas and harmful beliefs about themselves were all observed in the findings, as captured in Meg's description:

*“That's what I deserve. How does a person as filthy as me deserve a life here? I can't fix the damage I did, even to my own people. ... Everything in me is ugly. Everything I say is ugly. ... I [Meg] am simply fucked up. No pill or happy pill can help me. What's done is done. Why should I take pills? To erase the past? ... I look in the mirror and think, 'Look how ugly you are. You're hideous. You're fat. Ugly. You carry baggage. You have to cope with pills. What a joker!”*

### **Sub-theme 2.3: Behavioural implications**

Following the internalisation of the secondary victimisation, behavioural implications are evident in the findings of the current study.

#### **Sub-theme 2.3.1: Substance abuse**

Substance abuse has been recorded as a prevalent concern in previous research exploring the experiences of sexual offence survivors that engaged with various branches of the CJS in the United States. This is particularly the case in post-assault recovery as victims navigate attempts at regaining control of their recovery journey amidst negative reactions from parties to whom they disclosed their trauma (Peter-Hagene & Ullman, 2014: 1419, 1422, 1430–1433). Congruently, a few participants in the current study (Amy and Jo) reported substance abuse ranging from alcohol abuse to the use of illicit substances as a means of comfort or escape. The substance abuse was reported with continuous reference to those who secondary victimised

them. As a result, the substance abuse was included as a reaction to the secondary victimisation. Meg's recollection of her alcohol abuse in particular illustrates this:

*“I made my children sleep next to GARBAGE BINS in bars so I could get drunk to forget. HOW do you forgive yourself for that. ... Because to still wrestle with things at 42 years old that happened to me when I was eight ... is a lifetime. [Pause] It's a life of unnecessary mistakes. ... Things, like I said, that I did to my children that I can never take away. ... I CANNOT take it away. ... I did it. ... How many times did my son come get me out of the car drunk? [Shakily] Then I would vomit on him. Then he put me to bed. ... I CANNOT TAKE THAT AWAY. He SAW me. ... And that's the thing I'm still blaming myself for—is that I can't undo THAT damage I did. ... I can't erase it, it, I DID it. [Pause] So, YES, I, definitely, I would like to fix it or make it better or do SOMETHING just to make it ... easier for myself. ... [Pause] Yes, it has mostly, uhm, when I felt this, [pause] this little voice in my head, as I say, I just drank. It's emotionally how I handled it. ... The more I drank the less I felt like [Meg]. ... So, I, for me it was really, ... it was my comfort. ... I, uhm, ... started drinking very young and I, I drank heavily until a year and four months ago. [Referring to behavioural implications following the primary and secondary victimisation that occurred when she was six years old, although she continuously referred to how this related to her mother and her mother's reactions towards her]”.*

#### *Sub-theme 2.3.2: Acting out*

In addition to substance abuse, general forms of acting out—such as being generally defiant and rebellious, running away from home, and infidelity—were identified in environments of prolonged secondary victimisation (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014: 495). Mohanty et al. (2015: 889–891) refer to the cognitive and behavioural implications of internalised helplessness and note its correlation with a predictable pattern of behaviour across various situations. Individuals with internalised helplessness tend to exhibit higher levels of apathy in response to undesirable life circumstances. This contributes to a belief that outcomes and consequences are unrelated to one's actions and behaviour, which can lead to increased frustration levels and corresponding passive-aggressive behaviour. The behavioural implications of acting out, as reported by the survivors in this study, were consistently linked to those who had subjected them to secondary victimisation or emerged as a direct consequence thereof. Charlotte, who engaged in infidelity following prolonged secondary victimisation from her husband, described her behaviour and corresponding motivation as follows:

*“Uhm, and yes, I'm going to tell you, uhm, yes-s-s, my eyes wander, I've already had relationships. ... [Inhales deeply] Uhm, it's like that. But yeah, I HAVE had a lot of relationships, [clicks tongue] and then he can't understand, because remember that other guy makes you feel special. Uhm, listen here, you look beautiful or, understand? [clears throat]”*

#### *Sub-theme 2.3.3: Helplessness*

Varying degrees of learned helplessness were expressed by the majority of the participants in the current study, which manifested as a sense of worthlessness and inaction. Emma described the internal experience of “*feeling like nothing*” and, therefore, “*reacting like you are nothing*”. This is particularly aligned to the propositions held by the theory of learned helplessness in which victims feel powerless to change the outcome of an environment and become hopeless and passive in response (Peacock, 2019: 39). This further aligns with the tendency to withdraw from disclosure following secondary victimisation, as such withdrawal may be understood as a response rooted in learned helplessness.

***Sub-theme 2.4: Effects on the victim's healing process***

Campbell's (2008: 703) research purports that the manner in which interactions upon a victim's disclosure unfurl may have considerable implications for the victim's recovery process, as the negative psychological effects of the secondary victimisation can be long-term. This notion has been echoed in international literature and further posited to have more extensive implications on the victim's healing process than a suitable response would have (Dworkin, Brill & Ullman, 2019: 101750; Edwards & Ullman, 2018: 105–106). In the current study, participants indicated that secondary victimisation adversely affected the process of healing for all of them. The experience of the setback was commonly described along the lines of “*two steps forward and three steps back*” (Marmee), as well as feeling as though they were “*stuck or dragged down*”.

**Theme 3: Secondary victimisation as a potential silencing factor**

Secondary victimisation has been identified as a silencing factor in the recovery journey of many sexual offence survivors who, due to experiences of secondary victimisation, deem disclosure more harmful than beneficial (Ahrens, 2006: 263). Notably, most of the participants in the current study did not engage with the CJS at all, owing to the debilitating effects of secondary victimisation experienced in society. This is consistent with research conducted by DePrince, Wright, Gagnon, Srinivas, and Labus (2020: 401–402, 411), who observed a similar interdependence between social reactions received from support providers and the likelihood of victims approaching the CJS for assistance. They also found that women who received mixed or positive reactions to their disclosure within a social setting were more likely to report their victimisation to authorities.

A positive correlation has been identified between increased levels of perceived social support and survivors' willingness to participate in the criminal proceedings. This may extend to the perceived social support or secondary victimisation they could potentially be subjected to upon disclosure based on the social and cultural norms prevailing in their community (Hansen, Hansen, Nielsen, Bramsen, Elklit & Campbell, 2018: 685–686, 691–692; Moore, 2020: 685, 692–693). However, social support does not negate the adverse effects of negative experiences with officials operating within the CJS—particularly officials who serve as first points of contact during the acute phase following the victimisation. Literature maintains that such negative engagements result in compromised willingness to participate in the CJS process (Henninger, Iwasaki, Carlucci & Lating, 2020: 1363, 1374). Aspects of secondary victimisation as a silencing factor will be explored subsequently.

***Sub-theme 3.1: Disclosure of sexual victimisation***

Some of the participants ceased disclosure to some extent after experiencing secondary victimisation from loved ones (Emma, Amy, Charlotte, and Laura). Conversely, those who persisted in the disclosure of their experience—whether in a societal context or within the CJS—indicated that they considered withdrawing their cases as a direct result of secondary victimisation. In fact, secondary victimisation and a survivor's perception of others' reactions have been identified as key factors contributing to this decision and the subsequent reluctance of women to disclose their experiences (Dworkin & Allen, 2018: 85–86, 93).

Many participants, however, were empowered through counselling, which enabled them to resume disclosure. This process fostered growing comfort with disclosure and a willingness to continue seeking support from loved ones. In this regard, Emma stated:

*“Yes, [the disclosures] after my therapy process were almost a relief. It's like, yes. Beforehand, you approached this thing very carefully. And the last ones I simply— [pause]. We sat, we talked, and it came out and I told everything. And then of course I had that attitude of ‘do with it just what you want.’”*

**Sub-theme 3.2: Encouraging other victims to disclose their experiences**

Literature reiterates that many women who reported their victimisation to authorities reported that they would not have done so if they knew beforehand how they would be treated by members of the CJS. Additionally, these women would not advise other survivors to approach authorities following their own experiences of secondary victimisation (Steyn & Steyn, 2008: 56). Upon being asked whether they would encourage other survivors in similar circumstances to disclose their experience of sexual victimisation, almost all participants responded affirmatively. Some, however, raised concerns about engaging with the CJS.

**Theme 4: Measures to prevent and/or reduce secondary victimisation**

The following section addresses the measures identified by the research participants that could potentially reduce the incidence of secondary victimisation in a societal context. Awareness and education emerged as prominent themes within the findings related to potential measures to prevent and/or reduce the occurrence of secondary victimisation on a societal level. This course of action was recommended based on participants' assertions that secondary victimisation is often rooted in a lack of accurate, objective information and limited understanding. In line with this, participants emphasised the importance of promoting and normalising transparent, healthy discourse around topics of sex. The recommended efforts were directed, first, at survivors and, second, at those who might subject survivors to secondary victimisation (i.e., society at large).

**Sub-theme 4.1: Awareness**

The majority of measures within the theme of awareness were action-based in nature and centred survivors as the intended audience, aiming to emphasise the accessibility of support, mentoring and preparation (whether for disclosure or participation in the CJS), and to empower survivors. This might contribute to a more empowered and informed base from which survivors can approach their disclosure, which may result in a more positive experience of disclosure (Relyea & Ullman, 2015: 37, 50). One participant (Jo) suggested using schools as a platform for awareness sessions to foster open channels of communication with youth and offer a more engaged mentoring and support structure for students who choose to come forward:

*"I think there should, [clears throat] this voice, we should speak more openly ... and ... peop- [stammers], victims should learn that they, they shouldn't be ashamed of it. Because the thing is ... you can stand next to a woman today and, or look a woman in the eye, there in the pharmacy. I can help a girl ... with a morning after pill. And she was raped ten to one. ... Understand? But ... if I'm not going to talk to her openly and tell her, 'You know what, it's okay, you do not have to be ashamed. It wasn't your fault. If there's anyone who should be ashamed it's THAT person who raped you. He's the one who did wrong, HE's the one who ... messed up. But it's okay.' [pause] So, I would say there needs to be more distribution [awareness]—these where they're like, 'If you know someone who's abused, call this number.' 'Child abuse? Call this number on TV.' That's nothing. ... They're not going to respond to that. But someone who has a positive story—yes, my case was five years old—and you can, and tell the negative parts. Understand? Tell them, 'Listen here, it's GOING to be difficult. It's GOING to be hard. You're GOING to doubt. You're GOING to be scared. You're GOING to want to withdraw the case. You're GOING to want to run away. You're GOING to want to commit suicide.'*

*Because I have done it too, I cut myself too. Understand? You're going to do all those things; you're going to experience it. But [pause] here, rather choose to get*

*up, rather choose to look him in the eye and say, 'You are not going to get me down.' Rather choose to want to live better, to want to get somewhere in life. Understand?*

*But I feel like the only way it's going to work out is if more women can accept: 'It happened to me but let me use this to—'. [pause] My goodness, let's say open an abuse, sexual abuse, [pause] programme at the primary school and say, 'Do you know what?' [claps hands] Today, [pause] let's pull all the, ALL the girls, of those who can [pause], understand, sex education, whatever they get, who are allowed to attend, from that age, uhm, that they come to the hall and take an hour and say, 'You know what, uhm, there is a girl here today and ... I would gladly give my number and tell them if you have something to talk about or [...] have a story to tell or need [pause] advice or need support or ... anything. Like, be there, I'm here. Understand? I will help you, I will, I will go and have coffee with you for an hour and tell you not to lose heart, in my case it also went so and so.' Understand?*

*But the more women start to stand up and say, 'It happened to me, and I went through it', the more people, the more GIRLS, will start talking and start saying, 'But you know what, I was raped too', or 'I'm being molested too', or 'I'm also being abused at home.' Uhm, but ... it, it's about, it's not going to happen if there is no one who can show them, who can be an example and who ... can encourage them and like, ... understand, just help."*

#### **Sub-theme 4.2: Education**

Conversely, education efforts were aimed at those who commit secondary victimisation. This serves as acknowledgement that the internalisation of misconceptions surrounding sexual offences directly impacts on the manner (as well as the accuracy) with which evidence in a particular case is reviewed and evaluated. Furthermore, the thought processes that are involved in attributing responsibility and accountability in the case are affected and may compromise the individual's decision-making process in responding to the case. Thus, the internalisation of misconceptions, stereotypes, and rape myths principally contributes to the manner in which an individual responds to a survivor's account of victimisation. This may result in barriers to providing a survivor with the assistance, treatment, and support that they require (Alexander & Miller, 2022: np). It can, therefore, be argued that by dispelling commonly held misperceptions on a societal level and providing correct and accurate education on under-addressed issues, a more accurately informed society would be more adequately equipped to respond appropriately to accounts of victimisation (Relyea & Ullman, 2015: 50).

Congruent sentiments were reflected in the recommendations provided by participants. Laura, for example, described her sentiments as follows:

*"I think people are very uninformed about ... the-e-e- ... how can I say, the EFFECT it has on people and on victims. I think they are very uneducated with it. And that's why they often just go 'ugh' [gestures blowing off the topic], you know?... Yes, I think ... maybe just to inform people more about it, maybe. I don't know. And ... how to respond in the right way. [chuckles]"*

Beth elaborated by saying:

*"[Long pause] I think it starts with education. I think if parents teach their children early on [pause] about sex. We were never taught about sex. You weren't allowed to talk about it. And I think the older people swept it under the rug, and I think that's also why their reactions are negative too, you know. It doesn't happen, no one believes. You know how many people you hear about, and WE actually reap*

*the fruits of OUR parents and OUR parents who actually started the mess, ... and now it is affecting us. You know they didn't deal with THEIR issues, because I think if someone would have told my father that, what you are doing is wrong, you know. And go get help for what you're doing, but no one believed HIM. So now it comes down alo-o-ong in the chain in the chain in the chain".*

The use of age-appropriate literature in order to educate and empower children from a young age within their domestic setting also surfaced as a potential measure (Amy). It was, however, noted that persistence and consistency would prove to be a key factor in the pursuit of societal education.

Support and education for recipients of such a disclosure in order to educate them as they process the disclosure was, furthermore, recommended by Laura:

*"[Pause] [sighs pensively] [long pause] I think I would ... if I had told [boyfriend's name], I would rather have him here [at my counsellor], that he'd sit here so that [my counsellor] and I could have explained it to him together. Because maybe he would, he would have had better insight into it or, you know, how big it actually was for me. So, I might have done it that way instead of just trying it myself, you know ... [pause] I think maybe if I didn't have [boyfriend's name], I would probably then, ... if he understood it more too, then I might have had ... HIM along when I told her. So, I just have someone else, almost as support".*

## CONCLUSION

Despite the widespread academic, political, and social acknowledgement and discourse surrounding the matter of gender-based offences in global and local contexts, the ever-burgeoning rates of sexual offences remain an ongoing and pressing concern. This concern remains increasingly relevant within current South African political discourse (Francke, 2019). Women who experience varying forms of such sexual offences are, however, commonly burdened with the unique onus of not only positively proving the occurrence of an offence but also dismantling conjecture and misperceptions surrounding their victimisation (Ahrens, 2006: 270). While this already serves as an initial barrier to the disclosure of sexual victimisation, survivors of such offences who do disclose their experiences are often met with varying forms of secondary victimisation from the parties they approached for support or assistance (Cohn, Zinzow, Resnick & Kilpatrick, 2013: 457, 468, 470). Beyond the widely acknowledged personal implications of such secondary victimisation on the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of the survivor, its role as a silencing factor has received further attention. Many survivors have cited secondary victimisation as the chief deciding factor in the deliberation that led to their ceased disclosure as, in some cases, non-disclosure was deemed less harmful than continued disclosure and the corresponding secondary victimisation (Ahrens, 2006: 263).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> To retain the authenticity of the research participants' voices and not deprive the reader of the emotion and message conveyed by the participants, the researcher decided not to omit the profanities in the verbatim quotes of the research participants.

<sup>2</sup> The Thuthuzela project consists of numerous one-stop rape care centres that are operational across South Africa (National Prosecuting Authority, 2009: 2–4).

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