Growing recognition of rape victims

There has been growing recognition in recent years of the ways in which being a victim of sexual violence is synonymous with experiencing multiple forms of victimisation and re-victimisation. International research has identified various ways rape victims have felt re-traumatised by their contact with the various agencies of the criminal justice system, as well as in their own informal networks, by the media and potentially by any persons responding to their assertion that they have been raped (Ahrens 2006; Campbell and Raja 1999; Gregory and Lees 1999; Kitzinger 2009; Temkin and Krahé 2008; Taslitz 1999). Police services around the world have been criticised for failing to believe and investigate fully the allegations made by rape complainants (Du Mont et al. 2003; Jordan 2004; Kelly 2002, 2008; Lonsway 2010; O’Keeffe et al. 2009; Stanko and Williams 2009), and numerous writers researching rape victims’ experiences in court have dubbed it the ‘second rape’ (Doyle and Barbato 1999; Koss 2000; Madigan and Gamble 1991; Martin and Powell 1994; Orth 2002).

In recent years internationally, feminist advocates and rape support groups have challenged state responses to rape, resulting in significant changes being made to law, policy, training and practice. These developments have occurred within the wider context of the victims’ rights movement, as governments around the world have sought to find ways of enabling the justice system to be more aware and cognisant of victims’ needs. The enormity of these shifts should not be underestimated, reflecting as they do a move away from criminal offenders’
being the central and dominant focus towards a more victim-centred approach. Indeed such a shift has had implications within academia also, as victimology has developed and become recognised as a legitimate field of research and inquiry (Walklate 2007).

Many countries have introduced victims’ rights charters and other measures intended to protect victims’ interests. These have enshrined in law that victims can expect, for example, to be treated with compassion, to be kept informed about case progress and to be supported during justice system processes. Victims of the most serious violent offences have sometimes been accorded further recognition through specific clauses or policy statements introduced to underline the importance of ensuring the victims of these crimes are treated sensitively and offered additional information and services.

Outside of the state sector, key changes have also occurred within professional and non-governmental organisations. In New Zealand, for instance, criticism of the inhumane, even barbaric, way that forensic medical examinations of rape victims could be conducted prompted women doctors to establish their own training and organisation (Young 1983). Known as Doctors for Sexual Abuse Care, this group sought to ensure that in as many areas of the country as possible victims could be examined by a specially trained woman doctor, yielding vastly improved accounts of how this potentially invasive procedure was experienced (Jordan 2001). From the 1970s onwards rape crisis agencies were established by feminists in many nations to provide rape victims with support and counselling, and as recognition of the impact of rape trauma has grown, their role and importance has increasingly been underlined (Ahrens 2006; Campbell 2002; Cook and Jones 2007; Kingi and Jordan 2009). Despite this, most such agencies today remain grossly underfunded and are often reliant on the work of volunteers to deliver services (Maier 2011; Ullman and Townsend 2007). This represents a curious contradiction in that although state rhetoric regarding the importance of meeting victims’ needs is now routine, it has not been accompanied by increased funding for those providing the specialised services and victim support now recognised as central to their recovery. The salience of this observation, initially noted many years ago, remains evident in 2014:

by individualizing the experience of victimisation, and reducing it to a list of what ‘you can expect’ from criminal justice agencies, it distracts attention from the possibility that there might be structural problems underlying crime and criminal victimisation and that collective action might be an effective method of response. (Williams 1999, p. 394)