

# **A guide for lesbian and bisexual women who have been affected by sexual violence**



# Introduction

This guide is for **lesbian and bisexual women** who have been affected by sexual violence. Our aim is to provide an overview of the basics and to help you find the support you need.

If you're a survivor of rape or sexual violence and you are looking for support then by picking up this booklet you've already made the first step in the journey towards moving on. Sexual violence is an issue that is commonly misunderstood, downplayed or even denied; our **Myths and realities** section looks at some of the common assumptions that are made about rape and sexual assault.

Sexual violence impacts on the lives of survivors in very different ways but there are some common reactions which we'll help you to get to grips with. Whatever point you're at in your journey towards moving on, we want you to know that you're not alone. There is support out there if you'd like it and things can get better.

This booklet is for anyone who identifies as a lesbian or bisexual woman, but some of the information may be more relevant for cis-gender women. We also have booklets for trans people and for gay and bisexual men.

**If by reading this guide you decide that you would like our support, then please call us on 0845 3 30 30 30 or email [helpline@lgf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@lgf.org.uk)**

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# Understanding Sexual Violence

**Experiencing any form of sexual violence can be horrific and devastating.** Understanding the practical meaning of certain terms may help you take steps towards talking about what happened. Having said this, some people find that following a trauma they are unable to remember clearly what happened, so don't be alarmed if this is the case.

**Sexual violence** Sexual violence is a general term that includes many acts such as sexual assault, sexual harassment, rape, child sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, sexual slavery/enforced prostitution, female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

**Sexual assault** Sexual assault is any kind of sexual contact that is against a woman's will or is without consent. This may be because of force, violence, intimidation or where someone is unable to give consent (eg. through being drunk or on drugs, being too young to consent, being asleep or disability).

**Assault by penetration** The law says someone commits a serious offence if they put something into a woman's vagina or anus without that woman's consent. This applies whether the item is an object or a part of their body. Assault by penetration is a serious offence and carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

**Rape** The law says that it is rape if a man intentionally puts his penis into a woman's vagina, anus or mouth without that woman's consent. It is also classed as rape if a man continues to penetrate you after you withdrew consent, for example if you were having sex with someone and you told them to stop. Rape is a serious offence and carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Under English law one woman cannot rape another woman, but she can commit assault by penetration.

# Myths and realities

**Myth:** “If you don’t say stop it isn’t rape.”

**Reality:** There are many reasons why women find it difficult to say ‘no’. The woman might be afraid, she might be drunk or asleep, or she might be unable to speak for another reason. The law says that the person doing the assault has to show why they thought they had consent. The law also says that some people are legally not able to give consent, including anyone under 16 and people who do not have the mental capacity to give informed consent.

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**Myth:** “My partner or ex can’t assault me.”

**Reality:** You always have the right to say ‘no’. If you do not agree to sex then it does not matter if you have had sex with that person before. They do not have the right to continue.

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**Myth:** “I must have done something to ask for it.”

**Reality:** Absolutely no-one deserves to be victimised, assaulted or violated. It does not matter where you were, how you behaved or what happened in the run-up to the assault, if you haven’t consented then it’s wrong.

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**Myth:** “It can’t be rape/assault because I know them.”

**Reality:** Whilst the media image of rape may be of a stranger rapist, in reality many cases of rape and sexual assault involve perpetrators who are known by the woman. Whatever your relationship with the perpetrator, it doesn’t give them the right to engage in sexual relations that you haven’t consented to.

# Myths and realities

**Myth:** “One woman can’t assault another woman.”

**Reality:** A woman can be convicted of a serious offence for sexually assaulting another woman. If you were subjected to sexual relations that you didn’t consent to that *is* assault.

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**Myth:** “Being raped or assaulted has made me gay or bi.”

**Reality:** There is no evidence to suggest that being sexually assaulted changes your sexual orientation. You have the right to choose your own sexual partners.

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**Myth:** “Feeling aroused must mean that I enjoyed it/ consented to it.”

**Reality:** The body is wired to react in certain ways whether we want it to or not. Feeling aroused or even having an orgasm does not mean that you enjoyed it or gave consent. Some perpetrators use these physiological responses to cause confusion to the survivor and to make her feel more powerless.

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**Myth:** “No-one will believe me.”

**Reality:** No matter what your attacker or someone else may have told you, there are people who will listen to you and believe what you say. Check out the ‘Contacts for support’ at the back of this booklet for organisations that can help you.

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# Common reactions

## **The hours, days, months and years following a sexual assault or rape will be different for every survivor.**

Sometimes how we react and how we feel in the aftermath of an assault will differ to how we feel further down the line. There is no 'right' way to deal with trauma. For many women, knowing that they're not alone can be what leads them to seek support. Knowing that your reactions and thoughts are common amongst other survivors of sexual violence can bring some comfort and help you to start to make sense of how you're feeling. Many women will not have all of these emotions. Although you may experience some or all of these feelings, it's important to remember that they will not last forever.

Some emotions you may feel are:

### **DENIAL**

*eg. "I must have consented otherwise it wouldn't have happened"; "Maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought it was"; "She/he loves/cares about me so they couldn't have done this"*

### **ANGER**

*eg. "How could they do this to me?"; "If I was straight this wouldn't have happened"*

### **SHAME**

*eg. "I feel disgusting/filthy"; "I can't get clean"; "What will people think of me?"*

### **SHOCK AND NUMBNESS**

*eg. "I don't feel anything"; "Why can't I cry?"*

# Common reactions

## DESPAIR

eg. *"I can't cope..."; "I can't live with myself knowing this has happened"; "My life will never be normal again"*

## DISGUST AND REVULSION

eg. *"I can't bear to think about anyone touching me"; "I hate myself"*

## GUILT

eg. *"Why didn't I fight back?"; "Did I do something to make this happen?"; "What did I do that would make them want to do that to me?"*

## FEELING POWERLESS

eg. *"She/he still has control over me"; "I can't tell anyone"; "There's nothing I can do to stop this happening again"; "No-one will believe me if I tell them"*

## FEAR

eg. *"What if they've given me HIV or another STI?"; "What if I'm pregnant?"; "What if it happens again?"; "What if I report it and they find out?"; "I don't feel I can trust anyone now"; "I can't bear to be alone"*

## CONFUSION

eg. *"I felt myself get aroused, does that mean I was secretly turned on by it?"; "Is this why I'm gay/bi?"*

## **DISORIENTATION**

*eg. "I keep forgetting things"; "I can't make my mind up about anything"; "I don't even know what day it is"*

You may also have physical reactions such as anxiety or panic attacks, flashbacks, uncontrollable crying, low mood, inability to eat or compulsive eating, problems with sleeping, nausea, physical pain (such as head or stomach ache), itching, self-neglect (eg. you don't want to shower or eat), self-harm (either by deliberately hurting yourself or by drinking too much/ taking drugs) and feeling continuously on edge or restless.

As with emotional reactions, it's important to remember that your body's physical and mental response to trauma may be extreme but can change over time.

**You have survived a traumatic event and it's normal for you to have certain reactions to that, but with the right support you can and will move on with your life.**

# Reporting sexual violence

**Whether or not you report sexual violence is your decision, and not one that anyone should ever put pressure on you about. If you want to report an assault to the police there is no time limit on when you can do this, although reporting soon after an attack may allow important evidence to be collected.**

If you do report to the police, the likelihood is that you will be asked to talk to a specially trained police officer. Procedures vary from area to area but if you are in Greater Manchester the police will usually take an initial short statement from you and then escort you to St Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC).

At St Mary's you will be spoken to by a female Crisis Support Worker and then you will be examined and treated by a Forensic Medical Examiner (this will also be a woman, unless you request otherwise). This doctor will assess and attend to medical needs (such as emergency contraception, treating injuries, HIV PEP and STI treatment) and also collect medical evidence.

Many people believe that the only option for reporting an assault is directly to the police, but you may not feel able to do that, especially in the immediate aftermath of an attack. Another option is to visit your local Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC). You do not have to have reported the assault to the police to do this.



If you're in Greater Manchester, St Mary's SARC on Oxford Road in Manchester have a 24 hour helpline on **0161 276 6515**.

The staff at a SARC will be able to examine you and look after your health needs, including offering sexual health screening, HIV PEP and emergency contraception if required. Even if you don't want to report the assault to the police immediately, the SARC can retain evidence which could be used in the future if you requested it. No-one will try to convince you to report the assault if you don't want to.

The SARC will also be able to refer you for further support, for example counselling or your local Rape Crisis service. Many SARCs have Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, who can support you if you want to report an assault and through any subsequent investigation and prosecution. If you feel uncomfortable about attending a SARC, you can also seek healthcare from A&E or your GP.

For more information about the reporting process and about visiting a Sexual Assault Referral Centre go to **[www.stmaryscentre.org](http://www.stmaryscentre.org)**

# Seeking support

**Being a survivor of sexual violence can leave you feeling isolated and alone. When you are ready to talk, there are lots of people out there who can help you, including some services which offer specialist support for lesbian and bisexual women.**

You can find contact details of some useful organisations on the following pages but here are three things to think about when seeking support:

- If you decide to seek support through counselling or another support service, this should be at a slow and safe pace that you feel comfortable with. If you do decide to report an attack, your counsellor or support service will be able to provide advice on what the next steps would be.
- It's never too late to ask for support, even if the rape or assault is historical. For some women it can take decades to talk about sexual violence, but this doesn't mean the need for support is any less.
- Shop around for the support that suits you. Deciding which services you want to access can help you to feel empowered and more in control of your own healing journey.

# Useful contacts and support

**If you or someone else is in immediate danger, you should always contact the police by dialling 999.**

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## **The Lesbian & Gay Foundation**

At The Lesbian & Gay Foundation, we have been offering support to victims of sexual violence for over ten years.

We can offer:

- Immediate support through our daily pop-in service (Monday-Friday 10am-7pm)
- A listening and non-judgmental ear through our helpline service
- A safe and accepting space to explore your feelings through our free face-to-face counselling service
- The opportunity to talk to a police officer in our fortnightly police surgery
- Fortnightly free legal advice surgery

**Web:** [www.lgf.org.uk](http://www.lgf.org.uk)

**Helpline:** 0845 3 30 30 30

**Email:** [helpline@lgf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@lgf.org.uk)



# Useful contacts and support

## **Manchester Rape Crisis**

A confidential support service, run by women for women and girls who have been raped or sexually abused.

**Web:** [www.manchesterrapecrisis.co.uk](http://www.manchesterrapecrisis.co.uk) **Helpline:** 0161 273 4500

**Email:** [mrcrasacs@btconnect.com](mailto:mrcrasacs@btconnect.com)

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## **St Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre (Manchester)**

Offer forensic, medical and counselling services to victims of rape or sexual assault.

**Web:** [www.stmaryscentre.org](http://www.stmaryscentre.org) **Helpline:** 0161 2766515

**Email:** [stmarys.sarc@cmft.nhs.uk](mailto:stmarys.sarc@cmft.nhs.uk)

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## **Trafford Rape Crisis**

Free support, run for women and by women, in relation to incidents of rape, sexual abuse or unwanted sex, no matter when or where it happened.

**Web:** [www.traffordrapecrisis.com](http://www.traffordrapecrisis.com) **Helpline:** 0800 783 4608

**Black, Asian & minority ethnic women's helpline:** 0800 434 6484

**Email:** [dorothytrc@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:dorothytrc@hotmail.co.uk)

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## **Rape Crisis England & Wales**

A national charity and umbrella organisation for all of the Rape Crisis centres across England and Wales. Offers links to local support and runs a national helpline.

**Web:** [www.rapecrisis.org.uk](http://www.rapecrisis.org.uk) **Helpline:** 0808 802 9999

**Email:** [rcewinfo@rapecrisis.org.uk](mailto:rcewinfo@rapecrisis.org.uk)

## **The Survivors' Trust**

A national umbrella organisation for over 120 voluntary rape and sexual abuse specialist support services, with links to local support across England.

**Web:** [www.thesurvivorstrust.org](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org)

**Phone:** 01788 550554 (please note, this is not a helpline)

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

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## **Broken Rainbow**

National charity offering support to LGBT people affected by domestic violence or abuse.

**Web:** [www.brokenrainbow.org.uk](http://www.brokenrainbow.org.uk)

**Helpline:** 0300 999 5428 (from mobiles)

or 0800 999 5428 (from a landline)

**Email:** [help@brokenrainbow.org.uk](mailto:help@brokenrainbow.org.uk)

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## **Independent Choices**

Manchester-based domestic violence charity offering support for women who are being abused, have been abused or are in fear of being forced into marriage.

**Web:** [wdchoices.org.uk](http://wdchoices.org.uk) **Helpline:** 0161 636 7525

**Email:** [admin@independentchoices.org.uk](mailto:admin@independentchoices.org.uk)

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*The Lesbian & Gay Foundation would like to thank Dr. Kate Cook from Manchester Metropolitan University and Dr. Catherine White from St. Mary's Sexual Assault Referral Centre for their help in developing this booklet.*

We believe in a fair and equal society where all lesbian, gay and bisexual people can achieve their full potential.

This guide is available in large print by calling 0845 3 30 30 30 or email [info@lgf.org.uk](mailto:info@lgf.org.uk)



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