

MODULE

8

THE SPECTRUM OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

This module covers the spectrum of sexual violence: the wide range of behaviors that constitute sexual violence. It also provides an opportunity for programs to cover legal definitions specific to their own state or territory, as well as to explore where legal definitions may fall short of capturing all survivors' experiences. Participants will consider how understanding the spectrum of sexual violence informs their advocacy services.

LESSON 1: A closer look at what we mean by “sexual violence”

LESSON 2: Legal definitions

LESSON 3: Connecting it to advocacy



OBJECTIVES

Participants will be able to:

- Identify different forms of sexual violence
- Describe laws that define sexual violence in their state or territory
- Name different settings and situations where sexual violence takes place



MATERIALS

- Training agenda (if you create one)
- Flipchart paper or dry erase board and markers
- Pens/pencils and paper for each trainee
- Computer with screen, projector, internet, and audio (optional)



TIPS FOR PREPARATION

- Print or otherwise obtain items listed in the Materials section of this module and make copies for participants.
- Review lesson to be comfortable with the material before the training session.
- Obtain information specific to state/territory legal definitions of sexual violence and related laws to share during Lesson 2 of this module.



POINTS TO CONSIDER

Sexual violence is a broad term used to encompass a range of behaviors. We use this terminology to be inclusive of the many forms of sexual violence that exist, beyond those most commonly thought of, like rape or child sexual abuse, for example. This module provides an overview of the wide-ranging behaviors that constitute sexual violence.

- **Advocates support survivors' self-definitions of their experiences.**

An advocate's work is to not to define a survivor's experience for them, but to honor how survivors describe their experiences. Survivors may or may not choose to label their experiences for a variety of reasons. The choice is theirs. Advocates meet survivors where they are at and focus less on labeling and more on listening and providing support to survivors based on what each individual survivor needs.

- **We don't rank survivors' experiences.**

Some models that identify forms of sexual violence rank forms of violation in terms of perceived severity. Those models fall short. Instead, we use a trauma-informed model to understand sexual violence. A trauma-informed approach means that we recognize that we all have different lived experiences shaped by a variety of factors. The degree of harm that someone experiences and lasting effects of sexual violence have less to do with the specific form of sexual violence and more about a person's experience.

- **Advocates should be knowledgeable about state laws.**

While legal definitions of sexual violence don't lead the work of an advocate, knowledge of state laws (definitions, statutes of limitations, etc.) is important for survivors who are interested in pursuing criminal or other legal options.

LESSON 1: A CLOSER LOOK AT WHAT WE MEAN BY “SEXUAL VIOLENCE”

BRAINSTORM & DISCUSSION

Introduce this section by sharing that in order to serve the wide range of survivors that are impacted by sexual violence, it's essential that we understand the range of behaviors that are encompassed by the term “sexual violence.” As a large group, ask participants to name different forms of sexual violence they can think of. Encourage participants to be specific about what they mean. Trainers should take notes on flipchart paper as the group names different forms of sexual violence. Consider adding examples from those listed below if there are forms that the group doesn't name.

Examples may include:

- *Child sexual abuse*
- *Incest*
- *Sexual abuse by a priest or other spiritual leader*
- *Sexual harassment by a boss or co-worker*
- *Being groped by a stranger on mass transit*
- *Someone exposing themselves to another person at a party without consent*
- *When someone sends unwanted photos of their genitals*
- *Forcing someone to have photos taken of their naked body*
- *Forced viewing of pornography*
- *Watching someone disrobe or have sex when they have not given permission*
- *Hidden cameras in bathrooms or dressing rooms*
- *Being forced by a partner or spouse to have sex*
- *Being too drunk or intoxicated to give consent*
- *Not being of mental capacity to give consent*
- *Rape used as a corrective measure*
- *Rape used as a weapon in war and colonization*
- *Sexual assault of people who are incarcerated or in police or immigration custody*

- *Being sexually assaulted after consenting to previous intimate or sexual activity but not wanting to go any further*
- *A parent or other family member inappropriately touching a child*
- *A coach sexually abusing a player during away games*
- *A graduate assistant telling a student they will only pass if they have sex with them*
- *Unwanted sexual comments or advances while running in the park*
- *A preschool teacher sexually abusing a child in their care*
- *Targeting trans individuals with sexual violence as an attempt to degrade them*
- *Threatening to evict unless a tenant has sex with them*
- *Sharing nude photographs of someone without consent*
- *A boss sexually assaulting a farmworker who is undocumented and does not speak English*
- *A babysitter forcing an adolescent in their care to do unwanted sexual acts*
- *Videoing sexual acts without consent*
- *A nurse at a personal care home sexually assaulting a resident who is bedridden*
- *Receiving unwanted sexually explicit messages*
- *Sexual exploitation by doctors or other health care providers*
- *Being talked to with unwanted sexually objectifying language*
- *A middle-schooler having someone on their bus grab their breasts without consent*
- *A mentor using their influence over a mentee to coerce them into sex*

Allow space for participants to ask questions about any of the examples listed. Incorporate points from the “Points to Consider” section into the conversation.

Summarize by telling participants “Sexual violence means that someone forces or manipulates someone else into unwanted sexual activity without their consent. Reasons someone might not consent include fear, age, illness, disability, and/or influence of alcohol or other drugs. Anyone can experience sexual violence including: children, teens, adults, and elders. Those who sexually abuse can be acquaintances, family members, trusted individuals or strangers” (NSVRC, 2010).

PAIRS' DISCUSSION & SHARE BACK

This activity prompts participants to think more in-depth about sexual violence. In pairs or small groups, ask participants to reflect on what they notice in the list that the group has created.

Ask participants to respond to these questions:

- Where does sexual violence take place?
- Who commits sexual violence?
- Who are victims?
- What themes do you notice from the examples?
- What differences do you notice from the examples?

Once pairs or small groups have finished meeting, review the questions as a group, asking the smaller groups to report out on what they discussed.

Listen for:

- **Where does sexual violence take place?**
 - At home
 - In families
 - At school
 - At work
 - Online
 - Via technology
 - In trusted relationships
 - In medical settings
 - At parties
 - In public settings
 - On dates
 - In institutions
 - In prisons
 - Everywhere

- **Who commits sexual violence?**

- Acquaintances
- Friends
- Strangers
- Family members
- Partners/significant others
- People with power or authority
- Bosses
- Peers
- Caregivers

- **Who are victims?**

- Children
- Adolescents/Teens
- Adults
- Elders
- People who are incapacitated
- People who are not incapacitated
- People under the care of someone else
- People of all different races, cultures, genders, classes, ages, and abilities
- People who may be more vulnerable because of forms of oppression they experience and/or limited access to help
- Anyone

- **What themes do you notice from the examples?**
 - In many cases, sexual violence occurs in a situation where someone is in a position of power over the survivor
 - Sexual violence happens in all settings
 - There is not one singular ‘type’ of survivor
 - Sexual violence happens across the lifespan
 - A shared characteristic of these examples is that they all are absent of consent
- **What differences do you notice from the examples?**
 - Some forms of sexual violence involve physically touching someone else’s body, others involve words, threats, or making someone do something without their consent
 - Situations and settings where sexual violence occurs vary greatly
 - People who commit sexual violence aren’t just the “bad guy” or “monster” that gets presented in movies or media; their identities also vary and can range from people we know and trust to acquaintances to strangers

Wrap up this activity by reiterating the importance of understanding the wide-ranging behaviors that constitute sexual violence. There are overlapping themes and also important distinctions in many of the scenarios that were mentioned. When we are aware of the many different settings and situations where sexual violence takes place, we have greater capacity to meet survivors where they are at.

LESSON 2: LEGAL DEFINITIONS

LECTURE

For this section, trainers should review key laws that define sexual violence in the agency's state, territory, or tribe. This information will help participants be knowledgeable about criminal and legal options available to survivors.

Key points to cover:

- Legal definitions of sexual violence. It is likely that forms of sexual violence will be broken into different categories based on types of behaviors and age of victim.
- Statutes of limitations
- Note that additional information will be covered in a later section on working with criminal systems, so the specifics of reporting to police and pursuing criminal options will not be covered in this section.

REMINDER FOR THIS SECTION:

An advocate's role is not to be an investigator, judge, or jury. Advocates believe survivors and support them in defining their own experience. Sometimes legal definitions fall short of encapsulating all of the experiences of survivors; this does not invalidate a survivor's experience, but may limit their access to criminal or legal recourse. Advocates don't provide legal advice. They do help survivors understand their options and provide support, including throughout any involvement they choose to have in legal proceedings.

After covering the laws that govern your agency's region, invite participants to ask any questions they have. Trainers may find it helpful to have follow-up discussion about the ways that laws do and do not cover the totality of people's experiences.

Some discussion questions include:

- *What are some ways that laws pertaining to sexual violence help survivors?*
- *Where do our state's laws pertaining to sexual violence fall short?*
- *What might it mean if a survivor doesn't see their experience reflected in a law?*
- *How can an advocate honor a survivor's experience even if it falls outside legal definitions of sexual violence?*

LESSON 3: CONNECTING IT TO ADVOCACY

LARGE GROUP DISCUSSION

Now that the spectrum of sexual violence and legal definitions specific to your state/territory have been discussed, participants should consider how this understanding the spectrum of sexual violence can support strong advocacy skills. As a large group, ask participants to respond to: *How does awareness of the spectrum of sexual violence influence how you might provide advocacy support?*

Examples of responses include:

- Broader awareness to all of the places that sexual violence happens helps me understand that survivors don't have one singular experience.
- The different dynamics [where, who, when] are likely to impact a survivor's experience. This makes it important to provide support that is tailored to each individual's needs.
- It shows how important context is in understanding what might be helpful to a survivor. For example, some survivors may find a lot of support from their family, but family could also be a challenging dynamic for a survivor who was assaulted by someone in their family because their family may not feel like a safe and helpful resource.
- This awareness gives an opportunity to think broadly about challenges and resources that might be present in different scenarios that may influence what a survivor needs.
- It can help us understand that seemingly 'lesser' acts of sexual violence are not insignificant and can have a profound impact on a person.
- It can help us realize that there are many more people who experience sexual violence than we often hear about.

Trainers should also acknowledge that survivors might, for a variety of reasons, ask advocates to help them define their experience. Trainers should ask participants to reflect on why survivors might ask this so they can be thoughtful in their response.

Possibilities include:

- *They want help understanding what happened to them*
- *They know something felt wrong and are trying to process what happened*
- *They want to know if the services available are intended for them*
- *They would like to have validation or acknowledgment of what happened to them*
- *They are interested in pursuing criminal options and want to know how what happens to them fits within the law*

Trainers can reiterate points from the “Points to Consider” section into this conversation, reminding participants that advocates do not define survivors’ experiences for them, but are there to help process feelings and thoughts and provide information and support. Participants may find it helpful to consider how they might respond to a survivor who asks that question of them. Participants should be reminded advocates’ responses should be tailored to the survivor they are serving: their age, understanding, and emotional state, among other characteristics that might impact their reason for the question and their ability to understand information.

One example of a response is:

“What you are describing sounds like it could fall within a legal definition of sexual assault, however we usually define sexual violence much more broadly and believe that survivors get to name what happened to them in any way that feels right to them. We can certainly talk more about legal definitions if you would like, but I am guessing that you are asking because it feels like sexual harm/assault/violence to you and you are checking that out with me as you start to think about what that may mean for you...”

Trainers should invite questions from trainees about navigating such questions and remind trainees that advocates have regular opportunities for debriefing and support to reflect on how to handle situations that may be complicated or require extra attention.

References

National Sexual Violence Resource Center. [2010]. *What is sexual violence? Fact sheet.*
<https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/what-sexual-violence>

