

Editorial

Impacts of Sexual Violence on Relationships: A Reflection on Understanding Trauma and Supporting Survivors

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1. Introduction

Sexual violence is one of the most traumatic forms of interpersonal violence. Its short- and long-term impacts on survivors' psychological, physical, and spiritual well-being have been documented extensively (Sigurdardottir and Halldorsdottir 2021). There is also increasing interest in understanding relational consequences beyond the individual physical, cognitive, and emotional impacts on the victim. This editorial reflects on the six articles published in the Special Issue on the impact of sexual violence on survivors' relationships. The contributors to this Special Issue have analyzed the relationships between sexual violence, trauma, resilience, social relationships, attachment, emotional dependence, and recovery processes in diverse populations—and among both men and women—on three continents: Africa, Europe, and North America. Thirteen scholars shared their individual and collaborative research findings on sexual violence and survivors' relationships. A recurring conclusion is that while sexual violence is often directed towards the victim, its impact extends beyond the survivors themselves. Scholars have analyzed how survivors navigate context-based challenges such as cultural stereotypes and stigma, relational attachment, family and community reactions, intersecting social vulnerabilities, and other forms of violence as well as a host of systemic roadblocks survivors face in their efforts towards recovery. Although the studies focus on different countries and populations, they convey the same message: recovery from trauma is deeply relational and influenced by social, cultural, and institutional environments. Supportive relationships, community acceptance, spirituality, and opportunities for meaning-making repeatedly emerge as important protective factors, while stigma, discrimination, sexism, racism, and rigid gender norms often worsen suffering and hinder healing. This editorial reflection highlights two key themes discussed by the contributors to this Special Issue: (1) the systemic nature of the impact of sexual violence and (2) the importance of implementing a systemic and culturally sensitive approach to recovery from sexual trauma.

2. Systemic Impacts of Sexual Violence

2.1. Masculinity and Cultural Identity Following Experiences of Sexual Violence

In her two sole-authorship articles and third article co-authored with Mr. Mario Sonier, Dr Ines Yagi discusses sexual violence against men, a topic that remains underrepresented in research and public policy (Meger 2018; Gorris 2015). Their studies, involving male survivors in Canada and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, show that traditional expectations of masculinity, as projected through strength, self-reliance, emotional control, and invulnerability, create major barriers to disclosure and help-seeking. Arguably, these social expectations relationally disadvantage male survivors. Their fear of shame, ridicule,



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or being perceived as weak hinders their ability to connect emotionally and create strong and healthy bonds.

In fact, the relational consequences of sexual violence among men are profound and long-lasting. Survivors frequently report emotional numbness, difficulties with intimacy, distrust of others, and social isolation (Sigurdardottir et al. 2012). In conflict settings such as eastern Congo, survivors additionally face chronic physical health problems that interfere with employment and family responsibilities, leading to feelings of failure in their roles as protectors and providers for their families. Despite these challenges, the studies emphasize resilience rather than permanent victimhood. Dr Yagi has worked with many participants who redefined masculinity in more flexible ways that emphasized courage, compassion, wisdom, emotional openness, and responsibility rather than dominance and invulnerability, shifting from seeing themselves as victims toward adopting identities such as survivors, advocates, or warriors. These new identities allowed the survivors to reclaim dignity and agency while helping others face similar trauma and maintain a sense of relevance to their families and communities.

2.2. Family and Community Relationships

This Special Issue stresses that trauma affects not only individuals but also families and entire communities. In their research involving survivors of wartime rape—a valuable contribution to this Special Issue—Dr Cécilia Agino Foussiakda et al. found that post-traumatic stress symptoms remained highly prevalent more than ten years after the original assault, affecting both survivors and their spouses. Many couples experienced difficulties with communication, relationship satisfaction, emotional support, and sexual intimacy. Similar conclusions have been drawn in research on romantic-relationship experiences for couples where one or both members have experienced sexual violence (Stockman et al. 2024), highlighting a need for systemically oriented therapy in response to sexual trauma.

2.3. The Weight of Intersecting Social Vulnerabilities: Sexism and Racism

The article on “Rape victim-survivors’ experiences of social relationships and support” examines the experiences of rape survivors living within environments shaped by sexism and racism. Rape survivors in these environments often face other forms of relational trauma, adding to the complexity of the social challenges and the ability to trust and navigate support networks (Leung 2017; Koci and Strickland 2009). Sexual violence should be understood not only as individual trauma but also as social and relational trauma that occurs within broader systems of inequality (Leung 2017; Koci and Strickland 2009). Racialized women often experience intersecting forms of oppression that intensify psychological suffering and complicate recovery processes. For these survivors, negative social responses following disclosure can be almost as damaging as the original assault. As discussed in Yagi and Sonier’s contributions to the Special Issue, Maisha’s also documents that survivors may encounter victim blaming, disbelief, stigmatization, and rejection by family members, communities, institutions, and professionals. Additional pressures may discourage disclosure because reporting perpetrators can be perceived as betraying one’s community or reinforcing harmful stereotypes. These experiences contribute to silence, social withdrawal, shame, and distrust of others (Puri et al. 2011).

2.4. Anxious Attachment and Emotional Dependence: Heightened Relational Vulnerability

Sosa Barrios et al.’s article reviews research examining attachment styles and emotional dependence in relation to intimate-partner violence. While sexual violence was not the main focus of their work, the findings are consistent with reports of increased vulnerability to unhealthy relationships among individuals with relational trauma such as childhood sexual abuse (Pastor-Cerezo and Cuéllar 2026; St Laurent 2024). Insecure attachment styles,

particularly anxious attachment, increase vulnerability to both victimization and perpetration of violence, as individuals with anxious attachment often fear abandonment and may react intensely to relationship conflicts, increasing the likelihood of sexual coercion, control, aggression, and psychological abuse. Sexual violence, particularly child sexual abuse, has been linked to insecure attachment and vulnerability to inter-partner violence (Pastor-Cerezo and Cuéllar 2026; St Laurent 2024; Kwako et al. 2010). More specifically, interpersonal dependency, another vulnerability often cited for survivors of sexual violence (Bornstein 2005), emerged as major risk factor for violence in romantic relationships. Individuals who rely excessively on romantic partners for emotional security may remain in abusive relationships despite repeated victimization or may engage in controlling behaviors to prevent abandonment; sexual violence renders survivors vulnerable to such relationships. In contrast, secure attachment functions as a protective factor that promotes healthier and more stable relationships, the kind of relationships in which survivors can find crucial support for their healing.

3. A Systemic and Culturally Sensitive Approach to Recovering from Sexual Trauma

3.1. *The Role of Family, Community, and Spiritual Relationships*

The contributions by Foussiadka et al. and Maisha to the Special Issue emphasize that effective interventions must adopt ecological and family-centered perspectives rather than focusing exclusively on individual symptoms. Recovery depends not only on psychological treatment but also on supportive family relationships, community acceptance, economic stability, and social justice. Furthermore, spirituality repeatedly emerged as an important source of resilience. Prayer, religious communities, and faith practices provided hope, emotional support, and opportunities for meaning-making when other institutions failed to respond adequately. Social support from spouses, relatives, and community members also played an important role in promoting recovery and reducing isolation. The crucial role of social support and spiritual community in the recovery of survivors of sexual abuse is increasingly prominent in research (Pitino 2021; Bryant-Davis et al. 2011). The ReSTO therapeutic model discussed in Maisha's article emphasizes three interconnected relationships: with oneself, a therapist, and others. The model postulates that healing occurs when survivors rebuild trust, self-worth, belonging, and interpersonal safety rather than focusing exclusively on symptom reduction. Sexual violence is a relational trauma that cannot be addressed effectively when overlooking the potential of healthy connections to oneself and others.

3.2. *The Roles of Art and Collective Meaning-Making in Sexual Trauma Recovery*

A comparison of survivors' experiences in Canada and the Democratic Republic of the Congo demonstrates that healing extends beyond symptom reduction or clinical treatment; survivors can benefit from engaging with their community through artistic activities such as storytelling, music, writing, painting, ritual practices, and spiritual expression. These activities provide alternative pathways for processing trauma and expressing emotions that are difficult to verbalize (Jewsiewicki 2000). In addition, readers will learn through the work of the contributors to this Special Issue that experiences in nature, spirituality, compassionate relationships, and creative activities help survivors move from fear and despair toward gratitude, connection, and hope. Survivors' stories emphasize how safe relationships not only protect against sexual violence but also allow healing. Despite differences in the authors' cultures and research contexts, the six articles draw on a common theme: the importance of safe environments where survivors are believed and respected, can learn to trust again, and can safely connect with their families and communities.

4. Conclusions

Across all the studies, the central conclusion is that trauma and recovery are fundamentally relational experiences. Whether one is examining sexual violence against men, wartime rape survivors, racialized women, or intimate-partner violence, healing consistently depends on supportive relationships, validation, social inclusion, and opportunities for meaning-making. Stigma, discrimination, silence, and rigid gender norms often intensify suffering, whereas compassion, community support, spirituality, and emotional openness promote resilience. This Special Issue, therefore, advocates for trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and relational approaches to care that recognize the social contexts in which trauma occurs. Effective responses require not only clinical treatment but also broader changes in communities, institutions, and public policy to create environments where survivors are believed, respected, and supported throughout their recovery journeys.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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