



Wednesday Workshop: Supporting Survivors of Sexual and Domestic Violence

Podcast Transcript

Episode 1: April 24, 2020

History of Sexual Assault Awareness Month and How To Support Survivors

Presented by Marissa, Adult Domestic Violence Advocate, and Teresa, Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor

Marissa: Hello and welcome to The Women's Center's Wednesday Workshop podcast. This is intended for survivors of domestic and sexual violence as a time to learn and grow in order to move beyond their trauma. Each session will feature instruction on healing topic and this week we'll be sharing a history of Sexual Assault Awareness Month and also ways to support survivors.

We are your hosts. My name is Marissa and I am the Adult Domestic Violence Advocate here at The Women's Center.

Teresa: And I am Teresa, and I am the Dual Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Counselor here at The Women's Center, and we'll get started by talking about what is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Sexual Assault Awareness Month, or also known as SAAM is an annual campaign to raise public awareness about sexual assault and educate communities and individuals on how to prevent sexual violence. And every year it's observed entirely throughout the month of April.

Throughout the presentation, we're going to be looking at different national and state statistics, historical backgrounds of the movement, and how to support survivors of sexual assault.

Marissa: And this month with The Women's Center we are looking at empowering survivors specifically through awareness prevention and change.

Statistics in the United States: 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men have experienced some form of sexually violent contact in their lifetime. 1 in 5 women and 1 and 71 men will be right there at some point in their lives. We know that 91% of victims of rape and sexual

assault are female, and 9% are male. We know that, you know, sexual violence and rape can happen to anyone.

By and large it is a gender-based violence issue, so if you hear us talk with she/her pronouns for the victim, and he/him pronouns for a perpetrator we are reflecting the statistic but we do recognize that anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of rape or sexual assault. And also we wanted to point out that in 8 out of 10 cases of rape the victim knew the perpetrator. We often hear a single story about rape where it's some stranger in the bushes, on an unsuspecting victim, which is valid, and you know, it does happen. But, we know by and large, there is a previous relationship, whether it be friendship, acquaintances, intimate partner, family between the victim and the perpetrator.

Teresa: Sexual assault is the also the most under reported crime, statistically speaking, in the United States. Right now, we know that 63% of sexual assaults are not reported to police. And there are a whole wide range of reasons why a survivor might not feel safe or comfortable reporting to the police, and that is only one option that a survivor has after experiencing a sexual assault. The false reporting rates of a sexual assault are somewhere between 2 and 10% right now. These statistics are coming from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center Online.

The lifetime cost of sexual assault per victim is pretty staggering. It's \$122,461 per victim. So, just take a moment to let that sink in. That's pretty alarming, that's a lot of money for a victim to acquire from one sexual assault that they might have experienced. And this encompasses a whole wide range of issues that a survivor might choose to engage in. So that ranges from medical costs, mental health services, different supportive services, if they are modifying their safety at home, or if they're moving due to safety concerns. That also might look like legal fees or other things related to that.

And you know, we know that sexual assault and rape is something that affects the survivor both short and long-term, and so that's why it's really important to note that all of these things can be that, you know, immediate concern right after the assault, or it can be a longer-term, years down the line, in that healing process because we know it's not a linear process at all.

Marissa: Absolutely.

Teresa: Rape does cost the U.S. more than any other crime, annually speaking. So, in general, it costs the U.S. \$127 billion dollars per year. And that, to give you just a little bit of perspective compared to different crimes: Assault costs the U.S. \$93 billion dollars per year, murders costs the U.S. \$71 billion dollars per year, and drunk driving, which includes fatalities, cost the U.S. more than \$61 billion dollars a year. So this is really kind of to drive the point home that this is a very, very large issue not just within a

specific community, but within our communities, our state and our nation, this is a really big issue and that's why we focus on it for the entire month of April.

Marissa: We want to drive home the point that this isn't just some issue that happens to some people, somewhere. We wanted to bring in some local statistics as well from the state of Wisconsin.

This is coming from the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, otherwise known as WCASA. This is coming from their 2010 burden of sexual violence report. It is estimated that 390,000 Wisconsin women will experience rape at some point in their life. That is a huge number. That is, that is, staggering honestly.

To bring the statistics in from Waukesha County: 41.3% of women and 23.7% of men experience some form of sexual violence other than rape. And with that, only 23 perpetrators were convicted of sexual assault.

So again, while reporting is one of many choices of survivors of violence, we often see significantly lower numbers of convictions for perpetrators of sexual assault. To leave this on a less lower note, we wanted to highlight the fact that 13,346 survivors in 2010 were served by sexual assault service providers. Those are organizations like The Women's Center. Many service providers throughout the state of Wisconsin serving their local communities.

Teresa: We are going to get into more of a background and history of sexual assault. We know that this has been occurring for such a long time. It goes all the way back to writings from ancient Greece and early explorers and we have documented knowledge of sexual violence occurring all the way back then. We also know that sexual violence occurred during Christopher Columbus explorations as well, and specifically and enslaved women during the antebellum period were frequently assaulted by slave owners. The Jim Crow era marked the repeated acts of sexual violence against black women and unfortunately these cases of sexual violence in history were rarely if ever prosecuted.

Marissa: We wanted to highlight some important dates in the sexual violence prevention movement, starting in the 1940s to the 1960s and going up through time from there. We really started to see movements for social change begin during the civil rights era, although there was still limited discussion on sexual and physical violence, as Teresa was alluding to. An example of that is Recy Taylor, who was a survivor of a gang rape in Abbeville, Alabama in 1944. The men ended up confessing to the assault, but still no charges were brought against them. Just a little window into how limited that conversation was, and in the inequities in our community at that time.

We also really wanted to highlight that these efforts to address interpersonal violence were championed by black women and women of color. They really started this movement, got it off the ground, and we owe a lot to the movement and its present form to women of color. We wanted to highlight Rosa Parks, which I know is a household name for her work with boycotts. You know, she famously refused to give up her seat on the bus during the Civil Rights Movement but also, she was a strong victim rights advocate in her times. If you're interested in a little bit more background into that story there is a fantastic book called "At The Dark End of the Street" by Danielle L. McGuire. Fantastic read, I highly recommend. It gives a really strong picture into what this conversation looked like at this time in history.

Moving more into the 1970's and 1980's. We saw a more specific targeted movements for social change regarding sexual violence. In 1971, the first rape crisis center was founded in San Francisco California. In 1977 the Women's Center was founded. In 1978, the First Take Back the Night event was held in San Francisco California. Take back the night is usually sort of a march, to highlight you know, the feelings of safety, and really amplify the conversation on sexual violence prevention. So that was held in San Francisco, California for the very first time. In the 1980's, closer to the late end of the 1980's, the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault selected a week in April for Sexual Assault Awareness Week. So, we started with a week! And now throughout the entire month of April we honor this month as Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

Teresa: Moving through the 1990s and 2000s. In 1993 the Violence Against Women Act or better known as VAWA was passed. So VAWA is legislation that looks to improve criminal justice and community-based responses to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking in the United States. Victims of both domestic violence and sexual assault have been able to access services through this. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center was also established in this time. And in 2001 the Sexual Assault Awareness Month was observed nationally for the first time.

Moving to the 2010s to currently 2020, where we're at right now. In 2017, the hashtag me-too movement began. This is really where we start to see this conversation about sexual assault become engaged with social media and we'll talk a little bit more about that throughout this presentation, but this was a really big, pivotal moment within present times that we have seen.

And in 2020, to bring us up-to-date where we're at now, we are currently celebrating the nineteenth anniversary of Sexual Assault Awareness Month, but due to Covid-19, and social distancing, many of the events and movements have shifted to digital content like our Workshop right now in order to bring awareness to this and to get information out to the communities.

Marissa: And once again we thank you all for listening and participating in this new digital content that we are trying out at this time.

Teresa: Yes.

Marissa: To look more into the hashtag me-too movement, so that movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault, again, pivotal to the current conversation regarding sexual assault and rape. Like Teresa mentioned at this this began around 2017 in October as a hashtag on social media and from there it went viral, it expanded greatly, it demonstrated the widespread prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, especially in the workplace. This movement was founded by activist Tarana Burke and popularized on Twitter by actresses such as Alyssa Milano, Gwyneth Paltrow, Ashley Judd, Jennifer Lawrence and Uma Thurman following the Weinstein case. And even though 2017 was about three years ago, this movement is still strong it is something that I know so many of us have continued to hear about and we're continuing to have this really, really important discussion.

Teresa: Alright, so the goal of Sexual Assault Awareness Month was to raise awareness Nationwide. This has really begun to focus on prevention in our local communities, our workplaces and college campuses Nationwide. And really starting a conversation about bystander intervention as well. If we're seeing behavior or language, how do we how do we teach individuals whether that's on a college campus or out in our community is how do we engage with that? And how do we communicate that this isn't okay?

So, another goal of Sexual Assault Awareness Month is to prevent it before it happens. And so, this looks like challenging and changing behaviors to promote respect within relationships. So, this is done through a lot of education about what healthy relationships look like. Also, a lot of conversation and education around what consent is and what is not. And so, this requires us to bring in audiences beyond advocates, such as myself Marissa.

The goal of SAAM is to really speak to those who may not realize that they play an important role in preventing sexual violence as well. Including friends and family members, really broadening the scope of we're talking to about this because since we know statistically this is such a large issue both in Wisconsin and in the United States making sure we're engaging a family, friends, different employers or workplaces like schools in the conversations so that we can all play this role in providing this as much as we can.

Marissa: And I really want to echo that as well. I know we've been talking about the movement from a historical standpoint and highlighting a lot of trail blazers as well as us being advocates talking about that issue. I hear a lot of folks wondering how can they

impact survivors. How you talk about sexual violence matters. Again, to echo what Teresa has said. The things you say every single day send a message about your values and beliefs. When you stand up for survivors of sexual violence, you send a totally powerful message that you believe and support them. And that you will not stand for sexual assault.

Teresa: How do we support survivors? This is a really big question. I think you know everyone kind of the grapples with, you know how do I respond to, how do I best support someone in my life that might be a survivor of sexual assault. We're going to look through some different points here to help you understand how you can support a survivor.

We first have to look at our beliefs and our ideas about sexual violence. And so really asking ourselves the question, what influences your beliefs about sexual violence and sexual assault? Taking a peek at our ideas. You know, we might have portrayals of what a quote on quote victim looks like, or what a perpetrator of a sexual assault might. And that can come from a lot of different places and that can be ingrained in us as a child through TV, you know, even as adolescents and adults you know we are constantly getting things from movies, news outlets, and other forms of media that might influence our ideas on sexual violence that we're not even aware of.

You know unconsciously taking in this information that might inform the way that we view not just a perpetrator of the sexual assault but also survivors of sexual assault as well. We know that sexual assault in the media is often inaccurate and does not tell the whole story. Much like anything, you know, right? That we're not getting that full picture so it's just a little blip of what that whole story might be.

It is really important to reflect on where you have seen or heard about sexual violence and some of those beliefs systems that you might carry. Taking a look at our ideas where our beliefs came from we're going to know how we're unconsciously responding to that so you know how to respond to survivors in the future. Leaving you with this question of "how does this impact your views or lead us some things about sexual assault?" Really taking the time to ask yourself that question, and to take a look at what's helpful and unhelpful. What can I take with me about the ideas that you know have been ingrained at a young age, or what do I need to leave behind right now?

Marissa: We also want to look at how your words affect others as well. You most likely know someone who is a survivor of sexual violence. They may not have told anyone out of fear of being blamed or judged. There are so many reasons why a survivor may choose not to share their experience and you know, as we discussed earlier with the statistics say they are far too high to simply not know anyone who's experienced to some form of sexual violence.

And if someone in your life is considering sharing something personal with you, they're likely listening to your opinions or attitudes for clues on how you respond. If they hear you talk a lot about how women make up rape for attention, you know, you're probably not going to be deemed a safe person to confide in to disclose that story to. Sort of as a way to really gauge whether or not you know the survivor is going to be believed by sharing their story. And with that you know even if we say those things and don't necessarily necessarily believe them, comments and jokes based on assumptions or stereotypes, again, they may not seem like big deal, but they could make someone feel unsafe about sharing personal or painful things with you. It's sort of on a continuum of violence.

You know these, jokes, these comments, they really normalize sexual violence in our communities and even though you know people who are making those comments may not necessarily feel like rape is okay, their comments are normalizing it and making it easier for perpetrators to continue to get away with it. So they're there is really a huge impact to the things that we say and do in response to this this problem this movement.

Teresa: What can you do to support survivors? Like Marissa had mentioned, you most likely know someone who is a survivor of sexual violence. Whether they have communicated that they are not ready to communicate that yet. Just knowing statistically that we all know someone, and most likely know someone who is a survivor of sexual violence, what can we do to support them?

It's important to understand that you don't have to wait for that critical moment or moments to say the quote on quote right thing. The words that you choose everyday communicate your values. Just to echo what Marissa had said too, the words that were using them were talking about sexual violence, the jokes that were telling that we're not telling, you know that is communicating what you stand for, the values that you hold, how safe of a person you are going to be.

You can also speak up when you hear comments that might blame victims or make light of sexual violence. And this can be difficult, but it's really important to break that that culture of victim-blaming. You know if you are in a friend group or you're out with family whatever that might look like, and someone makes a comment, you know really kind of stopping in and saying that's not okay, and actually this is victim-blaming language and utilizing that as a moment if it's safe for education so that survivors around you and survivors around you know that you are a safe person to go to if they so choose. Even if you don't have the perfect response or don't know exactly what to say in that moment, even just speaking up at and voicing hey this is not an alright behavior statement that you just made, shows that you don't believe in these stereotypes that you believe all survivors and that you are a safe person to talk to you if that individual chooses to disclose to you.

Marissa: And if you are a survivor of sexual violence in some capacity, what can you do? We want you to know that your responsibility is solely on your healing. And like we've been saying this whole presentation, you know, there are so many choices to make after an assault. It's not your job to report an assailant if you don't want to. It's not your job to go to the police if you don't want to. None of this is your fault. You've been given decisions that you never wanted to be faced with, and it's okay too to not want to engage with any of that. You know that is totally a valid choice.

We also want survivors know to seek support if and when you need it. That can be with a trusted friend or family member. Could also be a hotline, an advocate, counselor or therapist, it could be a support group, and it could be looking up information online, listening to on things like this, just something to help you normalize that this is you know that this is something that happened and while it wasn't okay that it happened either the choices that you're making are okay. And you're on that healing process and it's okay to be where you're at with that .

You are still here. You have survived this, and there is a lot of strength and power in that. Know you're not alone. You know unfortunately this is a huge issue but what that shows is the solidarity between survivors and that ability to press on despite the hardships that have been faced. For some folks this looks like publicly sharing their story. For some folks this looks like writing in a journal, or telling a pet, things like that. Whatever you know floats your boat, whatever works for you, and owning that story that's an excellent choice.

Teresa: You can become an agent of change. And we know that the words that we use and the words that we are hearing other people use around us definitely influence us. But our words that we choose to use shape the world around us. Whether you are showing your support for survivors or you are better helping someone understands these issues related to sexual violence, your voice is extremely powerful and that's necessary in this conversation.

Even making a statement like “I believe you” to a survivor if they choose to come forward, and they're talking to you about what they have survived through. A statement as simple as that can really help a survivor feel validated in their experience and feel heard. A statement like “it wasn't your fault” places the responsibility on that perpetrator where it belongs and takes the shame away from the survivor or the victim that has experienced that assault.

A statement like “I'm sorry this happened to you” let survivors know that what happened to them is unacceptable, and that it's not their fault. Another statement that you can use when talking to a survivor or you're not sure how to help, is even asking that question “can I help you?”. Allowing that person to you know ask if they need that support and you're also verbalizing hey I'm here for you if you do need that support right now.

And lastly I think this is one that that I use all the time, and I think we use a lot at The Women's Center, is "how can I help you?" or "what do you need most right now?". Allowing that survivor the power to choose what they want to do next or what they need to do next and whether that is, I need to take a break and I need to remove myself from this conversation, or maybe I need to go for a walk after talking about sexual assault or what I've experienced.

It's really putting that power back in that survivors court to allow them to make those decisions and empower themselves. If you use any of these statements when talking to a survivor about what it is that they've been through if they come forward and are disclosing to you as a safe person really utilizing some of these statements is an important thing to let them know that you're here you're that non-judgmental safe person and that they can trust you.

Marissa: Yeah, and for any survivors listening, those first three statements are also great reframes and reminders to give yourself, that fact that you believe what happened as your truth, that it wasn't your fault and that what happened is unacceptable. Those are all really great reminders to keep in your in your mind as a survivor.

Marissa: We wanted to talk a little bit about the resources that we used to come up with the material that we talked about today for the hashtag me-too movement. They have a website it's metoomvmt.org. We also looked at resources from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. They have a guide for friends and family of sexual violence survivors. We also looked at RAINN, the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network. And again wanted to reference the data from the Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault, the burden of sexual violence in Wisconsin.

Teresa: With that being said, we just wanted to say thank you for joining us to learn more about supporting survivors and a history of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. Stay tuned for next topics.

If you would like to talk with an advocate about your own experience please call or 24-hour hotline at 262.542.3828. Learn more about The Women's Center at www.twcwaukesha.org. Thank you, and be well.