



Illustration: Adele Sawyer

# It's a man thing

Support for the victims of male rape is beginning to improve lives but the organisations involved are crying out for funding and volunteers, reports Ciara Leeming

**Simon was just nine when he was raped for the first time, within days of his arrival at a Lancashire children's home.**

His two abusers were not paedophile staff but older inmates. Their attacks continued throughout the few months he spent in local authority care. But the return home did not mark the end of Simon's ordeal.

"I kept what happened to me quiet for a long time," he says. "It gnawed away at me until, when I was 14 or 15, I decided to disclose to someone who I trusted – an adult friend of the family.

"It took a lot for me to pluck up the courage to do this. But that evening he raped me."

It was the ultimate abuse of trust. It was another 15 years before Simon, now aged 39 and a father, dared broach the subject again.

An early adulthood marred by volatile relationships, a failed marriage, heavy drinking and persistent self-harm – he would break his ankle and wrist bones with a hammer – was largely, he now acknowledges, down to what he went through as a child. But when Simon decided to seek help, he was shocked to learn that most support services catered exclusively for women.

It led him to form the Male Rape Support Association (MRSA) – a Lancashire group that supports male victims of child abuse, rape and violence in the home. In the seven years since it launched, the organisation – one of a number across the north run by survivors for survivors – has worked with more than 4,000 men.

Simon tells *The Big Issue in the North*: "I contacted numerous rape and abuse support

organisations in an effort to get some counselling, but to be turned away each time just because I was a man really hurt.

"That made me realise I had to do something – not just for myself but for other survivors. So I bought myself a mobile and set up a helpline."

MRSA works in several ways. On an average day it receives four or five calls from new victims from across the UK and Ireland – people Simon either talks to himself or directs to services in their area. For men living in the Preston and Blackpool areas there are listening and counselling sessions that offer them the chance to come to terms with their experiences.

Their stories are diverse. One case involved a 17-year-old who was raped by a group of men while walking through a Blackpool car park

with his girlfriend. Another, Jay, 37, was raped again at 14 by an older cousin. He spent many years picking fights he couldn't hope to win and seriously confused about his sexuality. Many have never told anyone about their abuse before they pick up the phone. One recent call was from an 86-year-old Manchester man, who had been abused at the age of seven. "I was the first person he had ever talked it through with," says Simon. "Imagine that. On average, the men we work with have kept this locked away for 15 to 20 years. But this old man had never breathed a word of this in 80 years. When we finished talking he told me how much it meant to him to finally get this secret off his chest."

Dr Michelle Davies, a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) who has studied male rape, says men can be left with complex emotional problems following an attack. "Male victims are left with depression and anxiety, just like women. But for men there is an added dimension, where the attack often forces them to confront their own masculinity and sexual identity.

"A man who may consider himself heterosexual may question this means he is gay because he has now experienced sex with a man. If he can't get this straight in their own minds, it can be very difficult to find the words to confide in a female partner."

This confusion can be compounded by an involuntary physical reaction that means some men will get an erection during an attack. Culture, apart from the odd gag about dropping the soap in the prison showers. Yet it hasn't always been taboo.

In some ancient cultures, it was considered the right of victorious soldiers to rape the armistices they had defeated. The Romans used believed that the victim of this assault lost his or ruler.

Until 1994 though, male rape was not even classified as a crime in England and Wales, with perpetrators instead charged with the lesser offence of buggery without consent. The Criminal Justice Act of that year defined rape as "penetration either vaginally or anally without consent" and carried an equal life sentence, putting men on an equal footing with female victims for the first time.

Figures from the Home Office show that



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supposed to be victims, or to cry. Only women are meant to be vulnerable."

The perception that male rape only affects gay men – reinforced by sporadic high-profile attacks in areas such as Blackpool and Manchester's Gay Village – is also wide of the mark.

Research shows that rapists are heterosexual in up to 90 per cent of cases, and 60-70 per cent of victims are also straight. The rape of one man by another is an act not of sex but of violence.

In fact, heterosexual men may be deliberately targeted by rapists – who see it as the ultimate, most invasive act of domination possible. And while random attacks do take place, the bulk of male rape – about two-thirds – is carried out by someone known to the victim.

For those who have been through it, the impact of confronting and talking about the past can be momentous – for themselves and as self-harm, alcohol and drug abuse often diminish. Many return to study or work. "We usually notice the change a lot earlier than they do," says Simon. "To start with, some of them find it very difficult to shake your hand or sit in a room with men. We can arrange counselling for as long as they need.

"After a bit they start maintaining eye contact, will come and have a brew with the men before their session. It's a gradual process but we are helping to give these men their lives back – it's amazing the transformation that can come about even within a few months.

"It doesn't ever truly go away though. I still have my bad days, where I get flashbacks and still think about self-harm.

"I get thoughts about walking out in front of cars – not to kill myself, but just to take away my emotional pain. I haven't done it though, because I know there is light at the end of the tunnel."

Davies says: "We're probably at a point now which is similar to that for female rape 20 years ago. In the late 1970s and 1980s there were campaigns to encourage more women to report incidents and get support. We're probably seeing the beginnings of that for men now.

"The subject is certainly less taboo than it once was but a lot of people still don't really consider it a real issue. I'm hopeful that this is finally starting to change."

For support or to offer help with counselling contact MRSA on 07932 898274 or [malerape@yaho.co.uk](mailto:malerape@yaho.co.uk)