



## **The Need to Eradicate Sexual Violence: Rights of Women Position Statement on Sexual Violence**

Sexual violence against women is still a significant and current problem in society<sup>1</sup>.

Rights of Women believe that sexual violence is part of a continuum of violence against women, fundamentally linked to the inequality and discrimination which women have historically faced and continue to experience. We believe that international human rights law requires the UK to make, and continue to make, the tackling of sexual violence against women a priority.

Whilst we welcome the Government's violence against women strategy, we believe there is still much to be done within the criminal justice system and other sectors to stop sexual violence against women.

Emma Scott, Director of Rights of Women, says:

**"It is clear from the accounts of the women who access our advice lines that urgent action needs to be taken by police officers, prosecutors and other front line workers to ensure that survivors of sexual violence are heard and believed, not judged according to myths about how survivors 'normally' behave or what 'real' rape is.**

**We welcome Home Office initiatives to improve support for survivors and conviction rates for sexual offences but what we need now is sustainable funding for organisations providing direct services for women affected by sexual violence to ensure that all survivors get the support they need in order to access justice."**

### **International human rights law obliges the UK to address sexual violence against women**

The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women 1979 (CEDAW) is an international human rights treaty that focuses specifically on discrimination against women. Article 1 creates a right for women

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics from the British Crime Survey 2005-6 reveal that 24% of women have suffered some form of sexual violence since the age of 16.

not to experience discrimination. Article 2 obliges States to take measures to promote and establish equality between men and women.

In General Recommendation 19 the CEDAW Committee said that the discrimination women experience includes violence against women. Consequently, as a signatory to CEDAW, the UK Government is obliged to tackle sexual violence against women as part of preventing discrimination against women in the UK.

### **Using the criminal justice system to tackle sexual violence**

Rights of Women believes that the conviction rates for rape and other sexual offences are unacceptably low. Studies have shown that low conviction rates are linked to high rates of victim withdrawal from criminal prosecutions<sup>2</sup>, and in turn that a victim is more likely to withdraw her support if she is not supported by the police, prosecutors and other agencies in the criminal justice system<sup>3</sup>.

We are calling for the development of a consistent and sustainable victim centred approach dealing with sexual violence. As such we ask the Government to consider introducing separate legal advocates for victims of sexual violence, to be available for specific hearings and cross-examination in the criminal courts. We urge that measures to dispel rape and sexual violence myths are implemented and maintained throughout the criminal justice system, from training for all ranks of police and prosecutors to the introduction of general educative expert evidence for jurors on trials considering offences of sexual violence.

### **The violence against women strategy**

Part of the Government's initiative in relation to violence against women was to create a multi-agency approach to assisting victims<sup>4</sup>. Rights of Women welcomes this strategy. However, we call for the expansion of services across England and Wales in order to end the current postcode lottery for survivors of sexual violence, and ask that funding is guaranteed on a long term basis, to ensure all survivors have access to vital, sustainable, services.

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<sup>2</sup> Conclusions of the Home Office Report 2007 *Investigating and detecting recorded offences of rape*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; independent articles also refer to a "culture of scepticism", leading to poor relations between police and victims, *A Gap or a Chasm? Attrition in reported rape cases* L Kelly, J Lovett and L Regan.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the introduction of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs), Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs) and Sexual Assault Referral Clinics (SARCs)