



Women, Violence & Criminal Justice - *Surviving the Legal System*

The Response to Sexual Violence Project (RSVP) Working Group is auspiced by MHCC and is usually focused on issues around service provision for victims/survivors of child sexual assault who have developed mental health problems as adults. However, in recognition of the International campaign "16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence" which ran from November 25th to December 10th 2004, a forum was organised by the RSVP Working Group on December 7th and was held at The Conference Centre, Rozelle Hospital.

Despite the fact that one in five women will experience sexual violence during their life, all too frequently it is a crime that goes unreported. Victims are frequently advised by professionals not to go to trial because of the nature of the process, and the further trauma it may exact on them. Similarly the decision may be based on fear of the perpetrator, lack of trust in the system, shame or absence of support. Whatever the reason, even when a trial occurs, the likelihood of conviction is statistically very low, and even the most motivated and resilient victim is subjected to a process sanctioned by our legal system that seeks to undermine a witness under cross examination, challenge the 'truth' in a manner that is demeaning, and which frequently draws upon moral judgements by alluding to the victim's plausibility, prior sexual history or malicious agenda. Even children are not spared from being intimidated and questioned in ways completely inappropriate for their developmental age and in consideration of the trauma to which they have been subjected.

The interest and seriousness of the subject was reflected in the number of attendees at the forum. Over 110 people gathered to listen to eminent speakers who dynamically embraced a broad spectrum of aspects of the issue:- the legal process; policy; research and advocacy; child protection and the sex crimes squad; DoCS; NESB and minority religious, ethnic and disability group issues. The forum was also an opportunity for Tracey Stevens and Catherine Carney of the Women's Legal Services NSW, to launch their new publication: "*Counsellors & Subpoenas*," which can be ordered via www.womenslegalnsw.asn.au or phone (02)9749 7700. Dr Caroline Taylor also introduced us to her much needed handbook: "*Surviving the Legal System*" which can be ordered through Coulomb Communications via www.coulomb.com.au

After tea, our guest speakers formed a panel to discuss the barriers women face in our community when seeking justice and the additional obstacles experienced when victims come from NESB or minority groups. We would like to thank the following guest speakers and panel for a fascinating and enlightening afternoon and for the support that they gave to this event:

Jane Mulroney - Australian Domestic & Family Clearinghouse, University of NSW;
Dr Caroline Taylor - University of Ballarat;
Dr Melanie Heenan - Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault;
Tracey Stevens & Catherine Carney - Women's Legal Resource Centre;
Det Superintendent Kim McKay - Child Protection and Sex Crimes Squad, NSW Police;
Kim Nixon – DoCS, Penrith & Katoomba;
Susan Balding – Senior Policy Analyst, Centre for Aboriginal Health, NSW Health.
Monica Mazzone – Immigrant Women Speak Out

We also thank the RSVP Working Group for their assistance in making this a memorable event. We hope to put some more detailed information on our website in the near future. **For any enquiries regarding the RSVP Working Group or related matters please contact: Corinne Henderson on (02) 9555 8388 or corinne@mhcc.org.au**

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View from the Peak**