

Underserved and Hard to Reach: The Complexities of Online Disclosure of Sexual Violence, and Lessons for Critical Social Work Practice

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Abstract

This article seeks to explore the complexities of online disclosures of sexual violence that are situated within digital feminist social movements and activism. The literature suggests that in the face of being let down by traditional justice systems, many are utilising techno-social spaces to meet their needs for justice and support. However, online spaces are not without their risks whereby victim/survivors are subjected to further harassment or abuse. Notably, people from marginalised groups felt that online spaces recreated the types of injustice experienced in formal justice systems. Hence, an intersectional feminist lens is applied to analyse the experiences of victim/survivors when disclosing sexual violence, and how their 'justice needs' are met, or not met. This presents a critical issue for social work in the twenty-first century, and as such implications for practice, policy and research are discussed.

Key Words

Online Disclosure, Sexual Violence, Intersectional Feminism

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been an increasing number of people turning to social media as a tool for disclosing sexual violence, seeking support, and advocating for societal change in the fight to end gender-based violence (Li et al. 2021). Key to this growth is the culminating effort of digital feminist social movements such as #WhyIdidntreport, #WhyIstayed, and #Metoo in making the personal both visible and political by amplifying the individual and collective voices of survivors. It is suggested that this move away from disclosing sexual violence to formal services is related to the failures of traditional justice systems in meeting the needs of survivors (Fileborn, 2017; Powell & Henry, 2017). However, the growth of hashtag feminism has sparked debates on whether or not digital activism can serve as an effective method to create societal and structural change (Clark-Parsons, 2021). The act of online disclosure leaves victim/survivors exposed to nuanced risks such as revictimization, retraumatisation, silencing and exclusion (Clark-Parsons, 2021). The changing dynamic of disclosure experiences for victim/survivors in the 21st century presents a critical issue for social work practice. While some have noted that the social work profession has been hesitant to engage with techno-social spaces (Storer & Rodriguez, 2020), the unique justice-based values of the profession can alleviate inequalities in disclosure practices for victim/survivors through its application of trauma-informed care alongside intersectional feminist theory. For this essay, the term sexual violence includes sexual harassment, childhood sexual abuse, rape or sexual assault and intimate partner violence (World Health Organisation, 2021). Also, those affected by sexual violence will be referred to as victim/survivors as recommended by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2022).

Contextualising Sexual Violence Disclosure

While sexual violence is incredibly prevalent throughout the world, formal reporting to traditional criminal justice systems (i.e. police) remains uncommon (Reich et al., 2022). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2021) found that 17% of women, and 4.3% of men aged 15 and up had experienced sexual assault. Though the rate of sexual assault victimisations recorded by the police for Australians aged fifteen and over rose by more than 30% between the years 2010 and 2018 (ABS, 2019 in AIHW, 2020), the ABS (2021), found that only 13% of women who were assaulted by a male perpetrator reported to the police. This is concerning as a large number of women are going without formal support as

they lived with the potentially serious mental and physical effects of sexual violence (Alaggia & Wang, 2020).

Studies indicate that victim/survivors are more likely to disclose experiences of sexual violence in both childhood and adulthood to family, friends and romantic partners over formal services (Gauthier et al., 2019; Mennicke et al., 2022). Supportive reactions including empathy are key as it influences the healing process and victim/survivors' decisions to disclose to others (Gorissen et al., 2021). Ullman et al. (cited in Bogen, Orchowski, & Ullman, 2021), found that for victim/survivors positive reactions to disclosure involved being believed, being provided with emotional support and tangible aid, whilst negative reactions involved disbelieving or victim-blaming. Research demonstrates that the experiences of victim/survivors tend to be invalidated by perpetrators, families, communities, and institutions (Clark-Parsons, 2021; Fileborn, 2017; Zinzow et al., 2022). Hence, disclosing sexual violence remains a complex decision for victim/survivors, whereby a multitude of factors impacts their inclination to disclose experiences of violence to others.

Barriers to Formal Help-Seeking

It is imperative that victim/survivors are able to access appropriate services to support healing and recovery if they wish too (Zinzow et al., 2022). However, not all victim/survivors experience equal access to formal services due to numerous barriers to help-seeking (Bach et al., 2021). Formal help-seeking tends to involve seeking support from health systems such as mental health or sexual assault services or reporting through the criminal justice system (Zinzow et al., 2022). Despite this, extensive research has highlighted that barriers to accessing formal services exist at individual, social, cultural and political levels globally (see Bach et al, 2021; Whiting et al., 2021; Zinzow et al., 2022). In an international systematic review of sixty articles exploring barriers to formal help-seeking for victim/survivors of sexual violence, it was found that challenges exist at the individual, microsystemic, mesosystemic, and exosystemic levels (Zinzow et al., 2022). This includes experiences of self-stigmatisation and self-blame, which are worsened by cultural structures that emphasise rape myths, rigid gender norms, and secrecy to maintain family honour (Zinzow et al., 2022). Many also feared negative social reactions from friends and family and feared perpetrator responses to disclosures (Zinzow et al., 2022). Furthermore, it was demonstrated that there was a lack of education

surrounding what constitutes sexual assault or abuse, and a high level of inaccessible services and resources (Zinzow et al., 2021). These barriers are amplified for being from marginalised groups, leading them to be underserved by traditional justice systems (Bach et al., 2021). In a systematic review of forty-one studies from around the world, Bach et al. (2021) found that people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, with disabilities, financial instability, non cisheternormative identities, mental health conditions, problematic substance use, and older age were more likely to experience the same barriers highlighted by Zinzow et al. (2022) in accessing justice.

Trends and Trajectory of Online Disclosures

In an international systematic review of twenty-four articles, Gorissen et al. (2021) found that the victim/survivors had several intertwined extrinsic and intrinsic motivations towards choosing to disclose online. These revolved around seeking or providing support, engaging in education or activism, or commercial goals (Gorissen et al., 2021). Many of the participants in Clark-Parson's (2021) study revealed they had never spoken about their experiences of sexual violence before the #MeToo Movement, and that watching others share their stories alleviated the shame associated with sexual victimisation. Moreover, a study analysing 171 social media posts using the #MeToo hashtag, found that users were influenced by celebrities, and social media at large, to disclose their experiences of sexual violence online (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). The far-reaching impact of digital activism is further explored by Kaufman et al. (2021), who highlighted that in the year following the peak of the #MeToo movement, there was a sustained increase in the number of google searches about sexual violence and support services. This suggests that the act of making the personal visible and political may contribute to formal help-seeking and education (Clark-Parsons, 2021). This is at the same time as empowering victim/survivors to subvert dominant understandings of sexual violence, by reframing sexual violence as a systematic issue rather than personal or private (Fileborn, 2017; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018; Powell, 2015).

While some papers suggest victim/survivors *choose* to disclose sexual violence online, several studies concluded that individuals along this trajectory felt they had nowhere else to turn (Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016; Fileborn, 2017; O'Neill, 2018). Fraser-Barbour et al. (2019) found that people with cognitive impairments were fearful of disclosing sexual violence due to concerns surrounding mandatory reporting.

Though speculative, it is reasonable to deduce that one motivation behind online disclosure is the potential to simultaneously seek support while remaining anonymous (Bogen et al., 2021). Digital platforms like Twitter or Reddit (see O'Neill, 2018) are not the only places where people are sharing their stories, as founded by Fawcett & Shrestha (2016), who explored the experiences of three women who had blogs dedicated to processing their sexual victimisation. For these individuals without in-person support networks, techno-social spaces provided a safe environment to express their emotions and recount of the incident(s) (Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016).

Challenges associated with Online Disclosure

However, many argue that digital spaces are not safe or appropriate for the online disclosure of sexual violence. Bogen et al.'s (2021) study on online disclosure of sexual victimisation concluded that there was a lack of research exploring why victim/survivors refrain from disclosing sexual violence online. Though speculative, they deduced that fears regarding losing agency and control over ones story, fear of legal ramifications and the possibility of experiencing 'trolling', or online harassment discouraged people from disclosing online (Bogen et al., 2021). Consistent with this, Mendes et al. (2018) found that 72% of participants in their study experienced trolling, hostility or harassment related to their digital feminist activism. Experiences of harassment online featured threats to individuals' professions, safety and livelihood, forcing people to try to escape an intangible domain and leave behind their family, friends and community (Henry & Powell, 2018). Salter (2013) highlighted that those whose experiences of sexual violence do not match traditional narratives of a violent assault from a stranger, were more likely to be dismissed or experience harassment, despite most assaults occurring from someone familiar to the victim/survivor (Whiting et al., 2021).

Additional concerns surrounding the emotional labour, and retraumatisation of victim/survivors engaging in online disclosure is also common in literature (Clark-Parsons, 2021; Fawcett & Shrestha, 2016; Fileborn, 2017; Fileborn, 2019; Powell, 2015). When engaging in techno-social communities where online disclosure was expected, victim/survivors often described feeling as though they were forced to share personal details and relive their traumatic experiences in unregulated spaces such as Twitter (Clark-Parsons, 2021). Similarly, participants in Fileborn's (2017) survey exploring online disclosure for street harassment victims noted that engaging in online support communities

also comes with a high level of emotional labour and burden., Thus, a tension arises between the need for support and advice, and the strain on those who are unable to provide the necessary support (Fileborn, 2017). Adding to this burden is that many victim/survivors received little to no financial compensation for their time, advice or knowledge of these online communities (Mendes et al., 2018). This is not to say that victim/survivors do not encourage others to take breaks and practice self-care (Clark-Parsons, 2021; Fileborn, 2019), but that using techno-social spaces to disclose sexual violence remains complex.

Discussion

As highlighted by Clark-Parsons (2021), the key debate surrounding online disclosures of sexual violence, and the interrelated digital feminist social movements, is whether these are effective in meeting the individual and collective needs of victim/survivors and facilitating social and cultural change. Victim/survivors are not a homogenous group with the same static and immobile needs, and their experiences are often situated within the systems of power and oppression regarding race, class, sexuality, and ability (Powell & Henry, 2017). Drawing upon Crenshaw's (1991) analysis of gender and race, intersectional feminist theory provides a useful understanding of how these factors cannot be disentangled and produces unique and cumulative effects on a victim/survivor's lived experience and life course. Crenshaw (1991) posits that every individual is comprised of multiple intersecting identities that are situated within broader systematic structures of oppression or privilege. For example, research estimates that Indigenous women are twenty-seven times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be hospitalised for all types of assaults (AIHW, 2021), yet rates of disclosure of violence to the police are lower in Indigenous Communities (Taylor & Putt, 2007, in Willis, 2011). Barriers to accessing support for Indigenous Australians are like that of the broader community explored above, however, the long-standing effect of colonisation means a lack of culturally safe services produces additional complexity (Willis, 2011). Therefore, it is conceivable that the current justice system and support services fail to provide equal access to victim/survivors.

Given that women and other marginalised groups are historically excluded from traditional political debates, online disclosures using feminist hashtag activism can be considered a powerful tactic, that exposes society to the pervasiveness of sexual violence (Mendes et al., 2018). For many, Twitter and other social media platforms are considered safer, and

more accessible for engaging in feminist activism compared to offline spaces such as schools or workplaces (Mendes et al., 2018). Furthermore, Alaggia & Wang (2020) suggests that victim/survivors' feelings of self-blame and shame are socially constructed based on an individual's environment. Therefore, witnessing other victim/survivors share their stories in digital environments, subverts dominant understandings of sexual violence, and socially creates new understandings based on believing, validating and supporting victim/survivors (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). However, other research suggested that both formal support systems and services, and the digital domain are dominated by white, able-bodied, middle-class, cis-heteronormative women (See Bach et al., 2021; Clark-Parsons, 2021; Fileborn, 2019; Zinzow et al., 2022). Wafula Strike (2018) notes that many women with disabilities were excluded from the #MeToo movement. Fileborn (2019) further explains this by highlighting that people of colour, LGBTQ+ people and people with disability, can engage in the same disclosure practices as other people online, but their voice is not heard or valued to the same extent. Adding to the complexity behind online disclosure is the commodification of techno-social spaces (Gill & Orgad, 2018). For example, the most visible (or perhaps even impactful) forms of the #MeToo movement flowed through celebrities and commercial media, where advertisements, likes, clicks or ratings gave monetary incentives to disclosure practices (Clark-Parsons, 2021). This is where the interplay of globalisation, capitalism, and neoliberalism, intersects with the further marginalisation and exclusion of underserved and hard-to-reach groups (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Nevertheless, due to a lack of empirical research, it is difficult to ascertain the motivations behind victim/survivors' decisions to disclose violence online, but it can be concluded that it is often done with great care and consideration (Gorissen et al., 2021).

Bogen et al., (2021) highlight that online platforms offer victim/survivors who do not want to speak to traditional justice systems or support services an opportunity to share their voice. However, other scholars suggest that reporting is key to meeting victim/survivors' physical, mental and justice needs, and prevents reoffending among perpetrators (Chon, 2014, in Whiting et al., 2021). The concept of 'justice needs' are comprehensively explored by Daly (2014) and Clark (2010), who highlight those notions of participation, voice, validation, vindication or recognition and offender accountability should guide criminal justice reforms to better meet the needs of victim/survivors. While some literature explored above discusses how online disclosure situated within digital feminist activism can meet these needs for victim/survivors, the impact of abuse, 'trolling' and exclusion of

marginalised people from these spaces make for ‘limited, partial and muted sites of justice,’ (Fileborn, 2017, p. 1498). Nevertheless, the complexity surrounding online disclosures of sexual violence lies within its multifaceted nature that should not be subjected to dichotomous thinking (Powell & Henry, 2017). That is, all approaches to justice have advantages and disadvantages, that will not cease unless structural and systematic inequalities are alleviated (Daly, 2014).

These key debates in research demonstrate the level of complexity surrounding how victim/survivors use technology and social media platforms. There are various issues regarding both online and offline disclosures of sexual violence and treating the two as equivalent is inappropriate as the nature and context are so different (Bogen et al., 2021). Given that victim/survivors experience different levels of access to formal help-seeking, there is space to think about how online spaces can facilitate justice and storytelling. Yet, the extent to which online spaces can facilitate this is constrained by wider social structures and systems of oppression (Fileborn, 2017). It is important to also note that due to the nature of sexual violence, disclosure may never be a safe option for victim/survivors due to the perpetrators’ context. For digital activism to act as a form of social justice, that addresses sexual violence and alleviates the inequalities causing it, an intersectional feminist framework highlights the need to centre and amplify the voices of marginalised groups (Clark-Parsons, 2021). Online disclosure should be a safe choice for victim/survivors if they choose to opt for it, and safe for those who may encounter accounts of sexual violence online (Clark-Parsons, 2021).

Implications for social work practice

Trauma informed care in the digital domain

Despite the alleged hesitancy amongst social workers to enthusiastically immerse themselves within techno-social spaces (Storer & Rodriguez, 2020), throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic, many social workers demonstrated adaptability and resilience in transforming their practice to utilise digital domains while maintaining the principles of trauma-informed care (Hodes, 2020). This was particularly evident when supporting victim/survivors of domestic and family violence (Hodes, 2020). Key to the relationship between intersectional feminism, trauma informed care and social work is the use of critical thinking and reflection to prevent reinforcing oppression and power imbalances

(Mattsson, 2014). Hence, it is suggested that social workers can utilise this same skill set to assist in alleviating the inequalities experienced by victim/survivors when disclosing sexual violence online. Principles of trauma-informed care focus on ‘safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment,’ to aid in the support, healing and recovery of victim/survivors. (Fallot & Harris, 2006, p. 7). In creating trauma informed digital spaces, social media platforms can move to establish safeguards and robust policies for violating the privacy of victim/survivors, to alleviate the risks associated with online disclosure (Gjika & Marganski, 2020). Additionally, digital spaces can recruit specialised workers who can provide peer support, referral to appropriate services, or share information about support to those who do not wish to disclose online (Webber & Moors, 2015). Burrows (2011) also advocates for including social workers and other trained workers in facilitating specialised online support forums for victim/survivors to counteract the potential risks and spread of misinformation. However, it is imperative that this does not serve to disempower victim/survivors during this part of their journey. By implementing survivor-centred reforms, alongside social workers and victim/survivors, these technology platforms where disclosures are occurring can offer victim/survivors safety, control and agency over their stories (Gjika & Marganski, 2020). For social workers, becoming immersed in digital spaces can work towards alleviating the disproportionate risks that people from marginalised identities face online and thereby creates digital spaces that can promote social justice (Powell & Henry, 2020).

Some services have sought to utilise digital spaces to assist victim/survivors in disclosing sexual violence and providing space to underserved and hard-to-reach populations who may be fearful of traditional justice systems. The Sexual Assault Reporting App (SARA) was developed by the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Violence (SECASA) in Melbourne (Donnelly, 2013 in Powell, 2015). The app allowed victim/survivors to report their experiences, regardless of when the assault(s) occurred, or what type of assault, which are then sent in a deidentified report to the police if requested (Donnelly, 2013 in Powell, 2015). While the app unfortunately closed in 2020 (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2021), the latest *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032* (Commonwealth of Australia [COA], 2022) has suggested looking into creating similar alternative options for victim/survivors to disclose sexual violence. The SARA app is an example of how survivor-centred reforms can operate within the digital space, while providing control, and appropriate information to victim survivors. For social workers, it

is important to advocate for creating these spaces that understand sexual violence disclosures in more complex ways and can utilise social media to facilitate victim/survivors individual, and collective justice needs.

Future Directions

Although limited, most of the research explored in this article derives from a criminologist background (See Clark-Parsons, 2021; Daly, 2014; Fileborn, 2017; O'Neill, 2018; Powell, 2015; Powell & Henry, 2017; Salter, 2013). The introduction of a critical social work perspective in research can seek to advance ethical principles along the lines of social justice, social change and social inclusion in practice and policy setting (Gill, 2018). Key areas for future research highlighted by the literature focus on the use of robust, qualitative and/or quantitative comparative analysis of those who choose to or not disclose online across a variety of platforms (Gorissen et al., 2021). This could involve looking at the impacts of online disclosure in future research (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; O'Neill, 2018), or also looking at how online spaces provide more opportunities to reach victim/survivors who do not contact formal services (Storer & Rodriguez, 2020). For supporting victim/survivors of sexual violence who opt to engage online, social work's contribution focuses on promoting survivor-centred reforms, and holistic interdisciplinary practices.

Conclusion

In a culmination of popular digital feminist movements, and by being unable or reluctant to access traditional justice systems, victim/survivors are often turning to techno-social spaces to disclose violence, seek support and find community (Gorissen et al., 2021). Despite debates regarding online disclosure of sexual violence, research demonstrates that there is the potential for these digital practices to be a form of justice that makes the personal political. In doing so, victim/survivors seek to deconstruct dominant narratives about sexual violence by promoting agency, control and community over their stories. However, the act of online disclosure opens victim/survivors up to real-life risks in an intangible domain. Whereby, the complexity of disclosing sexual violence online (or offline) is still shaped by a combination of lived experience, and the interplay of race, gender, ability and sexuality. Social workers must work towards making online spaces safer for all individuals who wish to use them and engage in research to further explore online disclosures of sexual violence to best support victim/survivors.

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