

Just Advocacy for Male Survivors of Sexual Assault

Introduction [00:00:05] Now, this is recording, RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents Just Science.

Voiceover [00:00:20] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode five of our Research and Considerations for Sexual Assault Cases season, Just Science sat down with Marya Simmons, founder and CEO of Shift in Notion Consulting, to discuss supporting male survivors of sexual assault. One of the common misconceptions about sexual assault is that it is always a male perpetrator and a female victim. However, research suggests that this isn't always the case. Marya Simmons and many advocates like her work to improve outcomes for sexual assault survivors regardless of race, gender, age, or sexual orientation. Listen along as she discusses myths around sexual assault and best practices for supporting male survivors in this episode of Just Science. This season is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Tyler Raible.

Tyler Raible [00:01:25] Hello, and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Tyler Raible with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. Today, we'll be discussing male victims of sexual assault. To help us in this discussion is our guest, Miss Marya Simmons. Marya is the founder and CEO of Shift in Notion Consulting and is a nationally recognized victim advocate and trainer with a specialty in the formation of multidisciplinary teams and sexual assault response teams. Marya, it's great to have you back on the podcast. How are you doing?

Marya Simmons [00:01:51] I'm doing great today, Tyler. Thanks for having me back.

Tyler Raible [00:01:54] So Marya, you were a guest on Just Science earlier this year in a mini season we had in honor of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. We talked a little bit about Shift in Notion Consulting - could you give us a brief reminder of the organization, so we have a starting point?

Marya Simmons [00:02:06] Well, Shift in Notion was founded when I made a decision to shift my career and grow personally and professionally. I wanted to broaden my scope and my expertise and reaching broader audiences with my training. So, it was the perfect name for me because it stands for everything that I try to influence others to do, which is change our way of thinking, thinking positively instead of negatively, getting rid of doubt or fear of trying something new, and just transforming how we do things, how we think about things, and how we treat ourselves and others. The mission and purpose behind Shift in Notion is to educate, advocate, and influence a positive change by transforming thoughts of perceived expectations that we may have.

Tyler Raible [00:02:46] So it sounds like Shift in Notion then had a very busy year because of that. If we're constantly trying to shift the way we think about things, and as we're in the middle of a pandemic, you know, one and a half years in, what's it like being an advocate in the middle of all this?

Marya Simmons [00:02:59] Well, I want to first start by recognizing that many agencies during the pandemic may have had to cut vital resources and staffing due to the pandemic. In addition to that, there were significant funding cuts and staffing cuts across the board, which devastated many agencies and organizations who support survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. Many agencies may have and may still be working remotely while working with victims instead of meeting in person. So when doing direct services when I was, building rapport and trust was strengthened when I met with victims in person rather than over the phone in my experience. But either way, I made it work. It is still about meeting a victim where they are to the best of our ability. However, I mean, during the pandemic, it's also been an opportunity to be more creative and convenient in meeting victims where they are in virtual platforms, which can reduce anxiety about meeting a person, and allowing victims to engage where they're comfortable. And that can include the ability to connect with victims through telehealth support as well.

Tyler Raible [00:04:00] It does seem like a large part of that was about removing barriers, right, especially for people who can't travel now as opposed to couldn't travel before. It's a great opportunity to kind of revamp the way that things are done. So I want to dive right into the topic. Oftentimes, when we think about sexual assault cases and survivors, victims, we think about male perpetrators and female victims. But males can be victims of sexual assault as well. Marya, can you clarify a little bit as to why, as a society, we typically don't think about males as victims?

Marya Simmons [00:04:28] Well, I believe that there is a significant lack of awareness and education around the issue. We often hear about female victims. So that's where we are most commonly thinking that female victims are the only victims in this context. But those of us who work in the field and engage in support with victims of sexual assault, we live and breathe this work. We understand that male victims are victims of sexual assault and violence as well as females. Then you also have individuals who may not believe in sexual assault and that it can happen to men - that men are strong, they can protect themselves, or the belief in myths or bias. The reality is that sexual assault and rape are about power and control - not that the offender is attracted to the victim or that they want to have a romantic relationship. It's about dominance and self-gratification.

Tyler Raible [00:05:16] Marya, I know that RAINN reports over four hundred sixty thousand sexual assaults happen each year in the US. How do these numbers break down in terms of special populations, vulnerable populations, and stuff of that nature?

Marya Simmons [00:05:29] If we factor in vulnerable populations, such as the LGBT+ populations, 21 percent of transgender, genderqueer, and nonconforming college students have been sexually assaulted compared to the 18 percent of non-TGQN females according to RAINN as well. We must also attribute developmental disabilities, individuals with mental health or chemical dependency, and another main factor is a breakdown of boundaries due to past trauma.

Tyler Raible [00:05:58] These numbers - are these underreported assaults or how do these come into the equation?

Marya Simmons [00:06:03] Well, I think that these cases are associated for all the reasons that I just discussed. And in addition, involvement or previous involvement with law enforcement, fear of the criminal justice system and the criminal justice process are also key factors. So when you enter into the criminal justice system, it can be a lonely and isolating experience, especially when victims are not provided with resources and support

or they do not know that there are resources and support available. Some may have never told anyone about what happened, or they may fear that they will not be believed or that they may be retaliated against or that they could have feelings and thoughts of shame and guilt which are all common.

Tyler Raible [00:06:41] Right. There are these very common stigmas about masculinity, right - that men should be strong, that men should be able to protect themselves - to the point where it does create a toxic kind of situation. And talking about straight men, we're talking about gay men, we're talking about trans men - all of these barriers can prevent a victim from reporting. But do you think they're magnified even further for male victims?

Marya Simmons [00:07:05] I do. So in addition to everything that I just discussed, adding on additional layers of what happened after reporting, telling what happened to multiple strangers or having to tell family members or friends if their case moves forward or just fear of being judged or discriminated against definitely magnifies those barriers. But that is why it's so important to ensure that we continue to talk about these issues and challenges so everyone can understand that anyone can be a victim of sexual assault, and that all victims should be treated with dignity and respect no matter who they are. There could also be the denial or misbelief that they have been sexually assaulted, and so validating and rationalizing how a male victim may feel or just kind of just dissecting some of the thoughts and feelings that they are having and helping them to identify what they've just experienced, and that there are outlets for them to be able to process what happened to them, could be another barrier as well.

Tyler Raible [00:08:00] In the vein of barriers, and we mentioned a little bit about some of the rape myths - are there any other ones aside from "you can't rape men," any other rape myths that maybe we need to talk about or dissect a little bit?

Marya Simmons [00:08:11] Well, I think that the myth of men being strong and that they should be able to fight back is another myth - that they should be strong enough to be able to fight back and protect themselves. In addition to the topics that we just discussed, there are multiple layers and barriers that exist as to why that may not have happened. Again, the power and control of how offenders are seeking their victims - developmental disabilities, children, the elderly, especially when you're impacted by mental health and chemical dependency diagnoses - that's definitely a vulnerable leverage that offenders seek and that they look for and take advantage of.

Tyler Raible [00:08:49] So then how do we remedy this? Is one of the first steps breaking down these myths? Is it providing avenues for open discussion about them? How do we fix this?

Marya Simmons [00:09:00] I believe that continued awareness and education on sexual assault is vital in trying to break down the barriers and myths that are circulating within society, and just the disbelief that it can happen to men and females, not being afraid to talk about it. Because if we don't talk about it and deny its true existence, then society stays stagnant. But I think that if there is a transformation in how society thinks about sexual assault and violence, that there can be a collective acceptance, and the fact that sexual assault and rape are never the victim's fault. And we must shift that thought process and put the blame where it belongs - on the offender - and holding them accountable instead of a victim. I think as a society, if we could all accept everyone's individualities and appreciate our own weaknesses and get rid of the bias or- and the myth that society may believe in and have the willingness to help people when they need help

just because it's the right thing to do, no matter who they are - I believe that victims of sexual assault will be seen and heard, empowered, and resilient.

Tyler Raible [00:10:01] You touch on a lot of things here that are just ripe for discussion. As an advocate, then, with all of these things in mind, what can advocacy centers doing differently or doing more of to encourage male victims to come forward?

Marya Simmons [00:10:14] Well, I know that a lot of advocacy agencies and centers that I work with, they incorporate best practice models and trauma informed support. But if there are centers that don't, it's important to ensure that there are gender sensitive policies and practices in place and providing a safe space for male victims to come forward. They can gear messaging to encourage that assistance is available through their website and other diverse and inclusive communication platforms and collaborate with other agencies to individualize the services and support and programming for males, and seek guidance from them on what's working best. I think it's very important to seek out best practice models if you're just starting a new center or you are trying to strengthen the services that you are providing within your community in order to really strategically plan how to be able to engage and really support male victims as well as all victims of sexual assault in their communities.

Tyler Raible [00:11:06] Marya, you mentioned gender sensitive policies and practices. Can you kind of give an example or walk us through what would make something like that gender sensitive?

Marya Simmons [00:11:14] Well, I think it starts with the welcoming process. When you have any survivor coming to your door seeking assistance, it's about your initial contact. It's about making sure that you're building rapport in order to build trust with victims and survivors. But especially when you're dealing with a population that may not be so willing to come forward, it's about acknowledging their diversity and their uniqueness when they walk in, and being able to provide gender sensitive support for them and coming up with trauma responsive techniques and policies that everyone collectively - staff, your multidisciplinary teams - that they're all on the same page in providing the services, and understanding the unique needs of male survivors, and understanding the barriers that they may experience with wanting to participate in their cases or if their case moves forward or not. So I think that being able to really strengthen the messaging to stating that it's not just about female survivors, it's also about male survivors, children, the elderly - no matter who you are, that you are welcome into our center and that we'll be able to support and empower you through the process.

Tyler Raible [00:12:22] As you mentioned earlier, it's more about, for the perpetrator, it's power and control. So it seems like the easier targets are going to be the ones that you can kind of leverage that power and control over, right - vulnerable populations. So we mentioned some of the statistics from RAINN earlier, and I'm hoping that we can kind of focus in on that a little bit. I'm interested to hear if there is any distinction between assaults against trans men, assaults against gay men, assaults against straight men - if there's any kind of breakdown between these subpopulations of male as a broad category.

Marya Simmons [00:12:57] Well, I know that over the last several years, there have been situations of sexual violence against the transgender population. And so I don't necessarily know the statistics, but I know, again, that there are LGBT populations are definitely more vulnerable, and the fact that they are sought in sexual violence situations. Again, the 21 percent of transgender college students is what I had stated before, that they are at risk of

higher sexual assault than non-LGBT populations. And so I think that that's something for not only society, but for education platforms and colleges and universities, for them to be able to be cognizant of that as well, and also making sure that they're providing support and resources for all students on their campuses, because this is definitely a need and it's an issue. And then when you're also layering on the fact of college students, that especially on college campuses, you have the exposure to college parties and fraternities and sorority events, which can also increase the vulnerabilities of all populations, especially the LGBT populations on campus. So I truly think it's important for local rape crisis centers to be able to be visible on college campuses, as well as educators and staff to really be able to support victims who may have been sexually assaulted on campus.

Tyler Raible [00:14:20] I remember when I was an instructor at a midwestern university about six years ago, there was a lot of training around how do we respond to sexual assault on campus. And when you think about the proliferation of mental illness as a, like a developmental factor, you know, that's when a lot of mental illness shows up is when you're in college. Chemical dependency comes into play in some cases - there's at least substance abuse. I mean, you go to these monstrous parties, and it seems that things that would make somebody more vulnerable kind of show up in this age group. And then you also have the higher percentages kind of exemplify this issue. As this issue becomes greater and greater, and we have these populations that are afraid of not being believed or afraid of being re-victimized or afraid to even identify through their orientation - how do we make them feel like they can engage in the system?

Marya Simmons [00:15:14] Well, I think it's about having cultural humility. I think it's about really just diving into the importance of being able to support survivors through the process and really just encouraging them to let them know that there are people that care - that they won't be judged and that we, as a society, that we as professionals who engage with male survivors, that we look through a lens of humility, that we engage with them with true authenticity, and that we give them the strength and the courage to be able to participate in the process however they would like to participate in the process, and whatever that level looks like, because we know that justice looks different for everyone. And so it's OK, you know, if they are reluctant to engage initially. It's OK if they engage initially at the beginning and then they may not so much as the case progresses. But I think it's about that support that they get and knowing that they can reach out and seek the help when they need it and how they need it.

Tyler Raible [00:16:16] For those listening at home, we do have a previous episode about sexual assault on college campuses, Just the Facts about Campus Sexual Assault. We actually talked to a researcher who shed light on the problem of sexual assault on college campuses and prisons. So if anybody is more interested in the topic, we can link that on the podcast page. But, Marya, you mentioned that justice means different things to different people. And as far as supporting male survivors, how can advocates support the healing process, especially if their case isn't moving forward?

Marya Simmons [00:16:47] I know as a victim advocate, it's about ensuring support and communication consistently throughout all involvement. It was common for male victims not to reach out to ask questions or want to necessarily be actively involved in their cases. So if I didn't reach out or stay in touch, I could have easily lost contact with them at some point in their case. So it's about keeping them informed about the status of their case. And if it doesn't move forward, make accommodations to discuss the details and why if they have concerns about why their case is not moving forward. I often had conversations, if the case was not moving forward, with victims, along with the detective or investigator or

even the prosecutor, so that the victim had the opportunity to ask questions and receive accurate information from each party. It's also important to validate and empathize as I talked about before. They may not know how to express themselves. They may not know how they're feeling but showing them that they are not going to be judged, allowing them to- a safe space to be able to express their feelings and thoughts, it really influences and strengthens the advocates' ability to be able to build trust and rapport. Put in the effort and have patience with the process. You may be the first person who has actually shown them that people actually care. And so it's about the genuine connection that you are trying to be able to provide for victims to know that they are effectively and efficiently supported throughout the process.

Tyler Raible [00:18:11] That all makes perfect sense. I was actually in a training yesterday about trauma that talked a lot about the things you're saying, you know, providing the safe space, validating their experience, and recognizing that trauma kind of affects everybody differently. And what may be traumatizing to one person might not be traumatizing to the other.

Marya Simmons [00:18:28] Trauma shows up differently with every victim. And so understanding trauma and being cognizant of bias and barriers and definitely increasing and enhancing knowledge and skills around diverse topics definitely strengthens the techniques in victim engagement.

Tyler Raible [00:18:43] For sure. I want to talk a little bit about repeat victimization. So we see a pattern in female victims - they become repeat victims. So do we see this? Like if a male is offended at a young age, are they more likely to be assaulted as an adult? Is there a pattern of re-victimization?

Marya Simmons [00:19:01] Well, I think that there is the potential for re-victimization with any victim. As I talked about earlier, there may be a damaged sense of boundaries, especially if there has been past trauma. And so boundaries may be truly impacted if there has been any type of past trauma or sexual assault. And from my experience in working with victims is that they may be more vulnerable to being victimized because of prior victimization. We're also talking about the re-victimization of engaging with, within the system as well or with other professionals - how they may be judged or engaged with when they're working with other professionals or in other systems. And so I think that if we are talking about minimizing re-victimization, it's about understanding how trauma shows up so differently with everyone that we engage with and really just looking past how they may initially interact with us and really, truly diving into the underlying issues that may have caused their victimization in the first place in order to minimize re-victimization moving forward.

Tyler Raible [00:20:05] Can you talk a little bit about how multidisciplinary teams can have an impact on this entire topic?

Marya Simmons [00:20:12] Leaning on each other for expertise. We all have different roles and expectations, all the way down for medical professionals, law enforcement, prosecutors, and victim advocates. And so really, truly understanding each other's roles and how we can all work together to really enhance practices and strategies on how to support survivors of sexual assault from - no matter what entity and discipline that you're working from - collectively being on the same page is one. I also think that training is another component that is vital in making sure that multidisciplinary teams are on the same page as well, because if we are all individualizing trainings based on our discipline

then we're missing out on knowledge on the other disciplines and how they're engaging with victims and their expertise in engagement with victims. Working together, coming together to the table, sharing ideas, asking questions, and really understanding how each individual can really support the process together. When you work as a team, then you are not working in silos and doing things differently. When you're working as a team, you are really, truly building a network of support for victims and survivors.

Tyler Raible [00:21:22] I love the concept of building this network. I want to jump back a little bit, if that's OK. I want to talk more about some of these other rape myths. So the first one that immediately comes to my mind is only young boys that are assaulted. That's obviously not the case, right. You've mentioned that there are elderly populations that are assaulted. So can we talk a little bit about this rape myth that it's only young boys?

Marya Simmons [00:21:41] Well, I've also worked with teenage males as well. And if we think, in the capacity of the cases where teenage boys have been sexually assaulted by their educators, their teachers, and the vulnerabilities of having that type of experience from a person of authority, someone who they trust. So I work with male survivors in that capacity. I've also worked with elderly victims who may have been in nursing care facilities and/or that were in the care of others and reliant on them to be able to take care of them and who may have been taken advantage of. So there's definitely not just a population of young boys that are being sexually assaulted, but there are- it goes across the spectrum. And I think that if we're able to actually see and look into the different avenues that they maybe have exposure - students that may have been sexually assaulted by a sports coach. I have worked on cases that way as well. So it's really not just allowing our thoughts or beliefs to think that it only happens to a certain population, that it can happen to any population, any age, that I think that we can broaden our understanding and our acceptance of the issue and the topic as a whole.

Tyler Raible [00:22:57] It definitely seems that the victims of this population can run the full spectrum. Another method that's come into my mind as we're talking about this is that it's only male perpetrators - that can't be correct, right? Can you talk a little bit more about who are the perpetrators in this scenario?

Marya Simmons [00:23:12] The perpetrator can- it could be anyone. The example that I just gave you of teachers and people of authority. It could be a female. We also know that there have been a lot of cases in the media over the last several years where female teachers are engaging with or have engaged with male students thinking that it was appropriate for that type of relationship. But then when the exposure actually comes of these types of examples that I'm talking about, a lot of the times, the shame and the guilt that the teenage male victim may experience could look like minimization. It- sometimes it could just be fear of thinking that they did something wrong and not really putting the blame on who the perpetrator was. And so I spent a lot of time with trying to break some of those myths and some of the barriers and trying to engage with them. I saw a lot of shame that they were experiencing and really not being willing or maybe have been reluctant to actually talk about what happened because they couldn't conceptualize that it actually happened and that there was a sexual assault or rape that had occurred.

Tyler Raible [00:24:14] There are obviously a lot of factors, one just being perspectives - in terms of the myth itself, the perspective of the older female to younger male, or even like peer-to-peer age groups, there's that filter of what masculinity is. So I can imagine that, especially if you were- if you were a male assaulted by a female - that might even make it more difficult to come forward, right?

Marya Simmons [00:24:38] Absolutely. Because as a male, I think society has entrenched this thought process that females cannot be perpetrators of sexual assault and that there is an acceptance that having an older female in a situation being the perpetrator against a male victim is not considered rape or sexual assault. And due to the responses that may occur during the- during the assault, which is another myth - that our physical being, when it comes to a situation like that, we may not be able to respond in the way that our head is telling us to. And so saying that you didn't fight back or that you weren't able to stop the assault from happening is another myth that I think should be broken as well, because it's a natural response that may not be able to be controlled in the event that the situation has occurred.

Tyler Raible [00:25:30] You have- the effects of trauma can be instantaneous - shutting down, disassociating from the event.

Marya Simmons [00:25:36] The initial response could be to freeze and not respond by fighting back or leaving the situation. I've worked with victims who have not been able to respond verbally or physically during their assault, which really added on another layer of just guilt for them. Why couldn't they? And really trying to rationalize that common conception that you were able to respond to a situation that you had no idea that completely struck you when you weren't able to respond is one thing. We all try to think about how we would respond in certain situations - that we would do A, B and C - but actually being in a situation, it looks a lot different and cannot be an expected response from anyone except for that victim who was in that situation. And they responded to the best of their ability.

Tyler Raible [00:26:25] Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share with our listeners? Anything you want to leave them with today?

Marya Simmons [00:26:28] I think that the golden nugget that I want to leave for today, that as a society, when we hear myths, we need to break them. When we see violence, we need to stop it. Now that we know the issue, we all have the opportunity to prevent it. And so by speaking up and advocating for change, that we can definitely shift the way that society thinks about sexual assault and male survivors, victimization, and sexual violence as a whole.

Tyler Raible [00:26:55] That makes sense. Nothing's going to get better if we don't work together to fix it, right. Marya, thank you so much for sitting down with me today, with Just Science today, to talk about these rape myths, to talk about male survivors. Thank you. This has been such an enlightening conversation. I always appreciate both you and your perspective on all of the things that we get to talk about.

Marya Simmons [00:27:15] Thank you for having me, Tyler. It was a great opportunity again.

Tyler Raible [00:27:18] So if you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensic field, visit forensiccoe.org. I'm Tyler Raible, and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:27:32] Next week, Just Science sits down with Patricia Powers from AEquitas to discuss additional considerations when working with male victims of sexual

assault. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent a consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.