



# “At Least I Tried”: Swedish Police Officers’ Experiences of Meeting with Women Who Were Raped

Lisa Rudolfsson<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 2 February 2021  
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## Abstract

Interactions with police officers are of great importance as to how the reporting raped woman continues to process what has happened. The focus of this study was on police officers’ experiences regarding contact with women who report rape. Sixteen officers participated in focus groups, and the data were subjected to inductive thematic analysis. Participants stressed their wish to be supportive and empathic, but also their lack of support and prerequisites, e.g., lack of amenities in interrogation rooms. They felt frustrated and described their work as “trying” rather than succeeding. If unaddressed, such shortcomings risk negatively affecting both police officers and victims.

**Keywords** Focus groups · Police · Raped women · Re-victimization · Secondary traumatization

## Introduction

Swedish legislation defines rape as intercourse or equivalent sexual acts, depending on the degree of violation, with a person who is unwilling, unable to either comprehend or consent to the act, or in some way dependent on the perpetrator (Criminal Code, 1962/2018, Ch. 6, §1; author translation). Although Swedish police investigate 94% of the reported cases of rape, only 5% lead to successful prosecution and sentencing (Holmberg and Lewenhagen 2019). In 2019, a total of 8580 rapes were reported to the Swedish police. However, the Swedish Crime Survey from 2019 reports that 9.4% of all women in Sweden had been subjected to one or more serious sexual assaults ( $\approx$  482,400 women; <https://www.bra.se/statistik/statistiska-undersokningar/nationella-trygghetsundersokningen.html>), which is in line with the accepted supposition that most cases of rape go unreported. Women are significantly and unquestionably, more often victims of sexual abuse than men are. In 2019, of the total number of reported rapes in Sweden, 7940 involved a female victim (Brå 2019). The focus of this study is on police encounters with female victims.

Women who have been raped often suffer several traumatic reactions including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Wilson and Miller 2016). The psychological outcomes of women reporting sexual abuse seem to depend on whether they feel support and empathy from the professional (Ahrens et al. 2007; Maddox et al. 2011). Negative reactions from professionals, such as being cold or disbelieving, can exacerbate the psychological suffering within the victim, in literature referred to as re-victimization (Ahrens et al. 2010). In previous studies, many victims who report rape express dissatisfaction with the response they get (e.g., Jordan 2015), and among women who report rape, interactions with the police are prime contributors to re-victimization (Maier 2008; 2014). Consequently, encounters with police officers is of great importance as to how the raped woman continues to process what has happened, and further, if she chooses to seek help again (Campbell 2005). However, in order for the police to be able to be supportive, we must first explore how police themselves experience encounters with women who report rape and how their own feelings might affect their demeanor to these women.

## Police Meeting with Victims of Sexual Abuse

Meeting with victims of sexual abuse have been described as a difficult task for all professionals (Viviani 2011), and listening to stories with traumatic content on a regular

✉ Lisa Rudolfsson  
lisa.rudolfsson@gri.gu.se; Lisa.Rudolfsson@genus.gu.se

<sup>1</sup> Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, University of Gothenburg, S-405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

basis may overwhelm the professional's capacity to adapt and cope, leading to psychological difficulties. Some professionals may come to develop clinical symptoms similar to the victims, in literature referred to as secondary traumatization (Kerswell et al. 2019; Newell and MacNeil 2010). Police officers who in the line of duty meet victims of rape are among the professionals exposed to traumatic events across their careers (Kerswell et al. 2019). Previous research report that police officers are at prominent risk of developing PTSD, depression, anxiety, and substance-related disorders throughout their careers (Thornton and Herndon 2016).

Previous research in police officers encountering victims of sexual abuse stresses the importance of police empathy (i.e., a cognitive and emotional understanding of another's experience resulting in an emotional response reflective of a view that others are worthy of compassion and respect; Barnett and Mann 2013). For example, victims' likelihood of deciding to continue with the legal process has been linked to the level of empathy victims perceive in police officers (Maddox et al. 2011). Furthermore, victims who feel more comfortable with their interviewing police officer are more likely to disclose more information (Greeson et al. 2015). However, police officers role is to question the statements of both victim and suspect and police emphasizing with victims can be seen as a deviation from such objectivity (Jordan 2001; 2015). Furthermore, police officers are regularly confronted with complex emotional situations and if they become too empathically engaged, it may hinder them from making information-based decisions (Inzunza 2015).

Previous studies tend to focus on the minority of cases that go to trial (e.g., Daly and Bouhours 2010), and few have investigated the experiences of police officers who respond to and investigate cases of rape against women, including the vast majority that do not go to trial. In a study by Spencer et al. (2018), police officers expressed frustration and described themselves as working to compensate for a lacking criminal justice system by focusing on providing victims a less re-victimizing process. However, the authors also conclude that police officers may persuade victims from moving forward in the criminal justice system due to their knowledge of how few rape cases that is successfully prosecuted. Several previous studies focus on quantitative measures of police attitudes, e.g., rape myths acceptance (i.e., stereotyped or false beliefs about rape, often supporting male sexual violence against women; Parratt and Pina 2017). In comparison, fewer studies focus police officers' experiences of working with rape cases and their possible frustrations when working in the legal system. Hence, it seems urgent to gather information about how police perceive these meetings, what they regard as obstacles in the encounter, and what they perceive as beneficial.

## Aim

This study focused on police officers in Sweden: their descriptions of their work and themselves, and their thoughts and experiences of encounters with women reporting rape, i.e., what professional practices they perceive as beneficial and if there are professional practices that made such meetings difficult. Another focus was on police officers' view on guidelines, and their perceived need for support.

## Method

### Participants

The material consisted of three focus groups (4–6 participants each). In one district, only one police officer wanted to participate, and hence, an individual interview was conducted. Participants were 16 police officers (11 frontline officers and 5 investigative officers; 11 women and 5 men; ages: mid-20s–late 50s; work experience: > 2–> 30 years) working in the mid-north to the south of Sweden. Participants working as frontline officers had not received any specific training in how to interview victims of rape, while most of the participants working as investigative officers had received such training.

### Procedure

This study was part of a larger research project, titled Female rape victims: Quality of initial police and medical care contact, funded by the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority (grant no: 3108/18). Other studies from this project focus on the experiences of women who have reported to police and/or sought medical care after being raped and medical personnel who have worked with such women. The studies have been reviewed and approved by the regional ethical board in Gothenburg (ref no: 883 18/2020–06910).

Participants were recruited by the Swedish Police Authority, who forwarded a letter of inquiry to various police districts. The letter described the aim of the overall project and the focus group study and emphasized that participation was voluntary. Participants who were interested in taking part in a focus group were urged to contact the researcher. As participants were recruited through a third party forwarding the letter of inquiry broadly, no information as to how many officers that declined to participate can be given; all officers willing to participate were included in the study. Police Authority administrators organized a time and place for two focus groups to meet and the researcher organized the third focus group and the individual interview. Two focus groups were

conducted at the University of Gothenburg; one focus group and the interview were conducted at the police departments where participants worked.

The focus groups and interview lasted for 1.5 to 2 h each. All focus groups and the interview were moderated by the author. Focus groups and interview were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, including non-verbal communication and pauses, by the author using no qualitative software.

## Question Guide

Focus groups began with the moderator asking participants to share a memorable meeting with a woman who had reported rape. The next questions concerned how common it was in their position to meet with women who reported rape and how comfortable they felt meeting with women who report rape. Other questions concerned what professional practices they perceived as beneficial, for the victim and for themselves, and professional practices that made such meetings difficult. Participants were also asked about guidelines from the Police Authority; if there was anything helpful to their work within them and if there was anything in the guidelines that was hard to relate or lacking. Lastly, questions concerned what support participants had received or lacked. All questions were open-ended, and the moderator allowed the participants to follow their own concerns and encouraged discussion by asking follow-up questions so participants could give concrete examples and develop their reflections. The focus groups ended with the moderator asking participants how they had felt while talking about this topic in a focus group and how they thought they would feel afterward. The author invited participants to make contact if they thought of something they had forgotten or if they needed to discuss the feelings evoked by participating in the focus group.

## Analysis

The material was analyzed by hand (no computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software were used), according to inductive thematic analysis, described by Braune and Clarke (2006) as data-driven or bottom-up. In the first step, the author read and re-read the transcripts in its entirety without any attempt to fit the data into a pre-existing framework, and in the second step scrutinized each transcript, line by line, paying equal attention to the entire dataset ensuring repeated patterns in the data. The author labelled all relevant material (i.e., participants' descriptions about themselves, their work, guidelines, and need for support) with codes. Codes were discussed with another researcher. In the third step, the author reviewed the codes of each focus group and the interview. Codes with similar content were grouped in

preliminary subthemes. In the fourth step, the author grouped subthemes from each focus group into general themes; subthemes were first grouped into six general themes. In the fifth step, the author reviewed the coded data to investigate whether the themes captured and fit the dataset. Themes with insufficient supporting data were incorporated into a higher level of consolidated themes. The author then reviewed the themes to ensure that all relevant initial codes were represented in the thematic structure. In the sixth step, the author discussed the themes with another researcher and named themes as "A Sisyphian task," "Work that touches me," and "A struggle for restoration." Finally, the data extracts were reviewed to find quotes that best capture the essence of each main- and subtheme.

## Findings

The following text presents the main themes and subthemes that emerged in the analysis. Quotations have been lightly edited to facilitate reading. Participants' gender (F, M) and position as frontline or investigating officer are noted after each quote. Findings are summarized in Table 1.

### A Sisyphian Task

Participants described meeting with raped women as very demanding, especially since they knew that in most cases, their work would not lead to criminal prosecution. They described rape cases as hard to investigate and the demands put on them as sometimes exhausting. Participants said they felt Swedish society and the Police Authority did not prioritize investigating and punishing violence against women, and so they lacked the pre-requisites to meet empathically and respectfully with women who had been raped. All participants said meetings with these women made them frustrated with society in general, with their own organization, and sometimes with the raped women.

**Table 1** Main themes and subthemes

Main themes	Subthemes
A Sisyphian task	Work that puts high demands on me I am not given what I need It makes me frustrated
Work that touches me	I get emotionally involved I struggle to understand
A struggle for restoration	Caring for the woman Trying to care for myself

## Work That Puts High Demands on Me

All participants talked about rape cases as hard to investigate due to a usual lack of witnesses, suspects' denials, and often a lack of physical injuries. They even said that some cases were impossible to investigate, especially if the woman had not reported immediately after the assault or if she refused to go through a medical examination. The participants said meeting with women who reported rape was highly demanding, as every woman was different, and they need to learn the needs of each individual.

I think it is important to think, "What's this person like?" So that you don't become too formal, but that you're able to meet them in their way, so to say. People are very different, girls are different, and depending on age, what they do for a living, the situation... Well, like, "What are your specific needs when meeting with me so that you can feel strengthened?" (F, frontline officer)

All participants stressed the importance of being comfortable with talking about sex in physical detail, as well as being careful about what words to use to avoid embarrassing the woman. Participants also stressed the importance of posing questions so they were not accusatory or blaming: "I am always careful how I pose my questions so that they won't be accusing or victim-blaming or presumptive [sounds of agreement]." (M, investigator)

Frontline officers described handling different types of reported crimes as exhausting. Interrogations with women reporting rape were described as both time-consuming and time-pressured, taking a toll on both the woman and the officer.

I mean, those interrogations are tough [on the woman]. To completely empty yourself in that way, maybe you have to go a year back or two and you have to give details and if, for example, there were children involved, then you [officer] have to give notice to Social Services... You have to ask them [women] to go out and wait for a while because you have to call the prosecutor, maybe several times. /.../ Meanwhile, you are quite exhausted yourself and maybe these victims come in at a time when you haven't eaten or had a break for several hours—then it's quite challenging to do this... and to be professional... (F, frontline officer)

## I Am Not Given What I Need

When discussing the demands on them, all participants described a lack of pre-requisites to do their job effectively. Some participants attributed this lack to the fact that rape cases have low status as a crime mainly affecting women.

Participants described how interrogation rooms lacked things necessary to help a woman feel comfortable enough to tell her story. Many described being unable to offer the woman something to eat or drink or not having toys for her children to play with if she has had to bring them with her. Some participants even described feeling obliged to apologize for bringing the woman into such a room.

(1)The room, it doesn't invite you to tell, there's no warmth, no "welcome". It's like in a hospital setting, a cold, boring examination room with empty walls and it's been like that for a long time. /.../ I usually apologize for how our interrogation rooms look. (M, investigator)

Participants sometimes talked about the lack of prerequisites at the police station with resignation. "I mean, it's... crazy, we're so far behind. When I think of how badly equipped we are to care for these women it feels like we're stuck in the nineteenth century." (F, frontline officer)

Participants described the Police Authority as focused on instruments and techniques and inattentive to the caretaking aspects of police work. Although some participants said that things had become better in recent years, they also described the education offered within the Authority as focused on memory and interrogation techniques, rather than caretaking. Some described the guidelines offered within the Authority as a theoretical "paper product" with no basis in the actual experience of police work. Participants described that meeting a raped woman with respect and empathy was as a task neither taught nor prioritized in a systematic way. Rather, each officer had to learn by doing, making it dependent on individual intuition.

We, I, lack education regarding how to treat crime victims in general. I find it more to be up to each individual officer to think about "How do I want to treat a crime victim?" (F, frontline officer)

Many participants described watching and learning from colleagues. However, they also reported that just as they had learned from some colleagues, they had also learned what not to do from others. Investigators talked about the hazards of not being able to work in teams when investigating allegations of rape. They described how that not only affected the quality of the investigation and the treatment of the victim but also had a negative effect on their own health.

(1)We need more resources [sounds of agreements]. Because it's like... when you were at the hospital and there were several suspects involved; you would have had to be three or four from the get-go (2) Yes, yes (1) The way things are, you're only one, maybe two. /.../ (2) We were two, or almost as one of us was working part-time, and it wasn't enough. We did get

a conviction, but I mean it was at the expense of the investigator's health. (1F, 2M, investigators)

Participants sometimes described the lack of prerequisites and its effect on the victim with sadness and resignation.

You are actually embarrassed when you call to say... "Hello, I'm calling from the police. I know you filed a report of rape several months ago," [sighs] and it's just awful, it's... well you have to apologize. Well, it really feels awful to have to do that. (F, investigator)

### It Makes Me Frustrated

All participants described rape cases as frustrating. They attributed some of this frustration to their exposure to the dark side of humanity. However, the participants mainly described that the feeling of working in headwind frustrated them. They talked about it taking a toll on them, both professionally and personally. Participants directed part of their frustration toward society and part to the Swedish government not being willing to make the effort to institute the changes needed to safeguard women.

The government and the Authority and everything, they say, "We will put resources into working against domestic violence and sexual crimes. Now, we will make sure to put resources into that." They have said that for several years, but I haven't seen any serious attempts to do so [sounds of agreement]. If you're not down in the trenches, so to say, then no one takes it seriously. (M, investigator)

All participants expressed frustration that they did not have the capacity or mandate to work on the core of the problem: the fundamental power imbalance between men and women in Swedish society. In relation to this, some participants stressed the lack of preventive work against sexual crimes.

With everything else, there is a lot of talk about preventive work. "How are we to prevent gang-related shootings and stop recruitment into gangs?" That discussion doesn't exist in relation to sexual crimes. Then it's like, we've kind of accepted that this just happens [sounds of agreement] and we just take it job by job as it comes. We do absolutely nothing to prevent these problems. (M, frontline officer)

Participants also described frustration with the Police Authority for not being organized by specialties. Willingness within the Authority to thoroughly improve how victims of sexual crimes are met was described as absent, and political suggestions for improvement as insufficient. Participants also discussed how the top management of the Authority did not always value the experience of officers, and further,

that managements' priorities were off-track. Participants discussed a lack of knowledge as making it hard to keep up with research, which also affected the training available. Participants stressed that many officers were highly committed to their work. However, some colleagues were described as reluctant to learn something new to improve their work, thinking they knew enough just from having worked as an officer for many years. Participants also expressed frustration over some of their colleagues not working for the victim's best interest.

It's not always the right individuals; they aren't motivated, or they don't view their work as important. They have no perspective on how it is to be the victim of a crime. /.../ And I feel sorry for all the... victims, both men and women, who end up with these people who aren't interested and don't think that these reports matter. (F, frontline officer)

Participants also expressed frustration about having to work under the lead of prosecutors. They described prosecutors as not understanding the work of police. Investigators described prosecutors as too quick to drop cases that participants wanted to continue investigating. Even in cases leading to trial, the slowness of the system and the pressure put on the victim to tell her story over and over again were expressed with frustration.

Sometimes I feel like, "Why do we even conduct a preliminary investigation and why do we even record the interrogations?" when everything has to be re-done in court. (F, investigator)

In some cases, participants' frustrations were directed against the woman, mainly when the woman did not want to participate in the investigation the way the participants thought was necessary.

When you have a woman or a girl in front of you, who has been molested and she refuses to go through an examination... I mean, the enormous amount of frustration, where you just "Damn! If we are to work this, there are no witnesses, there's nothing. This is what we have to do, and now you don't want to!" /.../ I mean, you're almost pissed, you don't show it, but the feeling is that you're pissed off. Like, "Damn" [sighs, others agree]. (F, frontline officer)

### Work That Touches Me

Participants described how meeting with raped women affected them personally. They described listening to sad stories that stuck with them and made them sad as well. Female participants in particular described identifying with women who had been exposed to violence, partly because

of being woman themselves and partly because as female professionals they were more often assigned to such cases. Confronting sexual violence vicariously that way led many to struggle with understanding how some women could stand living the way they did, what consensual sexuality actually is, whether it were possible to help all women, and whether they were allowed to doubt the allegations of some women. The struggle to understand also sometimes included struggling to make the woman understand that what she had been subjected to was in fact a crime.

### I Get Emotionally Involved

All participants talked about the sadness of some meetings. Some felt that getting emotionally involved made them better equipped for new meetings and described meeting with raped women as more than a job. When participants recalled some cases they had handled, the sadness was sometimes hard to hold back.

I was, and now I'm... chills on my arm and I feel it coming [sounds sad] because it was, I was so into this. Her life, there it comes [cries], I'm reacting [wipes tears]. (F, investigator)

Participant's reactions to the women's stories and situations occasionally recurred after some time and/or in unanticipated situations. "My experience is that the reactions come two or three weeks afterwards. I mean, in a situation where you least expect it [sounds of agreement]". (M, frontline officer)

Many talked about feeling that although they believed the woman had in fact been raped, it would be very difficult to prove. Participants discussed the gap between professional objectivity and their emotional response to believing the woman sitting in front of them. They talked about the difficulty of finding a balance between showing empathy and being professional. The ability to be caring, while still staying focused on the task at hand, was sometimes described as learned over time and with experience. Because most rape cases do not make it to court, participants described feeling a lack of closure. They described how this affected them on a personal level and made the stories difficult to put behind them. They also ascribed their ability to put themselves in the position of the women to their recognition of the similarities between them. Both male and female participants talked about gender when meeting with raped women. Female participants described being able to identify with the women they met because they as women themselves felt better equipped than men to understand. The victims' own desire to talk to a female officer was attributed to victim's feeling more understood by another woman. Some female participants said they could empathize better than a man because they could imagine the pain of being raped.

Because sometimes the woman says, "But as a woman, you must be able to understand how I felt," and I say, "Yes, I can understand that." When it comes to pain, for instance, how the violence during a rape feels, I mean, I can definitely identify with that. (F, frontline officer)

Being able to identify with the woman gave female police officers a unique opportunity to make the victim feel supported.

With everything that relates to violence against women, I think it works by talking about it as a "we"... That you say, "We are not supposed to put up with this, we don't deserve this, we should be treated better." Then she feels, or at least I've perceived it that way, that it makes the girls feel stronger. (F, frontline officer)

Some participants noted the majority of women not only in the focus groups in the study but also in work within the Authority with domestic violence and youths. Although stressing that the individual was what mattered in these meetings, some male participants talked about their inability to identify with women as an obstacle: "Well, I have no choice. From the get-go, I always start from behind." (M, frontline officer)

Participants also described often wondering about how things had turned out for the women they had met. This was discussed partly as their wondering whether their treatment had been adequate and helpful to the women and partly whether their work had contributed to the case being taken to court. Participants talked about not knowing the results of their previous cases as an obstacle to them improving their work.

(1) Well, how many raped women have I responded to? 30, 50... How did it turn out, was I helpful? (2) And to grow and get better, it is quite important to know what you have done right and how did it turn out? (M, frontline officers)

### I Struggle to Understand

When talking about women raped by their partner in abusive relationships, participants sometimes struggled to understand how the women they met could live under such conditions. Participants also discussed how many raped women did not put up a fight to safeguard themselves. Although all participants stressed their awareness of how victims could come to freeze during abuse, many participants seemed to think that were they in a similar situation, they would fight for their life. Participants talked about needing to be familiar with the full spectrum of sexual practices to be able to distinguish consensual from non-consensual sexual

encounters. However, awareness about the variety of sexual practices also made participants struggle to understand the boundaries between consensual and non-consensual sexuality. Participants also discussed how as professionals they were not immune to notions about how a raped woman should behave and react, which made it more difficult to believe women who do not fit within these molds.

- (1) That is within us as well; the preconceptions of how a victim should react. It is still there, although it feels so old... I mean, the preconceptions about how a victim, the "perfect" victim, is supposed to be...  
 (2) That there is an ideal way, yes, that is true. (1) Unfortunately, it is. (1F, 2M, investigators)

Participants discussed whether it was okay to doubt women to their faces. Investigators described their task as not just accepting the woman's allegations but also investigating their veracity. Frontline officers seemed not to agree about whether they could express doubt. In some discussions, participants' wishes to discuss how to proceed when the woman's story seemed unbelievable were shut down by other participants claiming it not to be an officer's role to believe or doubt. The struggle to understand included sometimes finding it hard to make the woman understand.

[T]hen she said, "I was always to lay on my back, and he would caress my breasts." So I said, "Did you perceive what he did as a caress?" "Well, he..." and then she described how he quite violently groped, pinched, and smacked her breasts. So I said again, "Did you perceive that as a caress?" And she said, "No. No, I didn't." (F, frontline officer)

Meeting with women who had been abused over a long period of their lives, who had repeated contact with police, made officers struggle as to whether it was even possible to help most of the women they.

Is it true that we cannot help everyone? Can everyone be helped? Because, people are sick, or some are. You cannot fix some of them. No matter how hard we try, sometimes, I need to react that way, like "Okay I can do my best, but in some cases, I cannot make a difference." (F, investigator)

### A Struggle for Restoration

Participants discussed how most raped women would not get what they needed from the legal system. They described their own personal struggles to offer them some kind of healing through their efforts to take care of them, validation of their experiences, and demonstration that they had at least tried. However, they also described it as a struggle to take care of themselves, accept support from their colleagues, and allow

themselves their own emotional responses. However, they described how a culture within the Authority encouraging toughness hindered them from taking care of themselves. Participants also described how that culture did not validate their own efforts to take care of themselves and the women.

### Caring for the Woman

In the discussion about most rape cases not leading to trial, some participants discussed hoping that their work might at least make a difference for the woman by letting her feel that someone had listened to her. Participants described a need to validate the woman's experience and feelings, sometimes by explicitly acknowledging her experience. Participants described a need to, sometimes, go outside their professional objectivity to reassure the woman that they understood and believed her. Some talked about the shame and guilt many victims of sexual abuse experience and how they sometimes made sure to tell the woman that what had happened was not her fault: "To be allowed to lift that off their shoulders. 'Hey, it's not... it's not your fault.'" (F, investigator)

Investigators stressed the need to prepare the woman for how difficult and tough rape investigations usually were on the victim. Frontline officers talked about how time-pressured police work usually was and stressed the importance of ensuring that the woman was given enough time and assured that they were not in a rush.

Because there is a lot of talk about police being too busy, especially we who work on the field. Well... you often hear, "Well, you must have other things to do now. You must have better things to do than to talk with me." You really have to say, "We're here for you and we can take the time that's needed" /.../ You need to show them that it's okay by putting your phone down and turning your radio off: "We are here with you, and this is where we are supposed to be." (F, frontline officer)

Participants stressed the importance of using their body language to show the woman that she was listened to. Easing in to the harder parts of the woman's story by creating a safe environment was also stressed as important. Investigators mainly described using their own caretaking ability to help the woman tell her story and remind her that they could stand listening to difficult stories. "I need to remind them 'I have heard everything. You can say whatever you want to, whatever you feel comfortable with,' ... and you need to repeat that. (M, investigator)

Participants stressed the need to make the woman feel safe during the interrogation. They also described needing to prepare women for the difficult questions that would be posed during an interrogation, explaining that they were necessary because they could come up later if the case went

to court. Some had developed their own way of asking the harder questions so that the woman would not perceive them as threatening, for example, by asking what the perpetrator was wearing before asking about the woman's clothes. Participants also talked about needing to prepare the woman for what would come next in the process. Investigators discussed feeling responsibility for caretaking after the interrogation, something not included in guidelines, but something they had learned from experience.

For example, how do you send a person home after an interrogation? I usually think... well, you can't, you do not want to send this woman home alone /.../ Because, after the interrogation, my life continues as usual, but she has just told me about the worst thing that's ever happened to her. (F, investigator)

One participant had made it a habit to phoning and trying to meet with the woman if the prosecutor chose not to take her case to court, making sure to make clear that the woman felt believed. The thought of being able to help women made participants' work meaningful and motivated them to continue. Some participants talked about their job as a helper and as possibly bringing the women, if not legal, then at least psychological restoration. However, regrets about the legal system became apparent, as participants described their work as trying to help the women, rather than succeeding. "The process can still be rewarding for the woman, knowing that, at least I tried." (F, investigator)

### Trying to Care for Myself

All participants stressed the importance of debriefing with colleagues. Frontline officers sometimes talked with their colleagues on the ride back after a call. However, investigators described working most cases on their own and therefore lacking natural opportunities to get support from colleagues. Participants described that meeting with many victims resulted in an accumulated sadness that they felt a need to let out. In a profession that encourages emotional toughness, they expressed a need to allow themselves to cry. However, participants also talked about a culture within the Authority that discouraged showing emotions as police were expected to be tough and able to keep it all inside. "I might think, 'I'm supposed to handle this, why am I reacting this way? I'm supposed to handle this.'" (F, frontline officer)

Participants said that showing emotion or their need for personal support was taboo within the Authority. One male participant described once needing rehabilitation and feeling that some colleagues had looked down at him for "being weak." Participants talked about either trying to stay tough and risking a mental breakdown or becoming "lazy" enough to retain their own health, but possibly lessen their motivation and ability to care for the women they met.

Although participants said they tried their hardest, they sometimes developed cynical tendencies, as they did not want to overwork cases that they knew would not make it to court.

Sometimes I feel like, there is no need to put too much effort into a case that we know is going to be dropped anyway. (F, investigator)

All described not feeling validated for their efforts and stressed the importance of finding ways and contexts to care for themselves to protect themselves from an emotional crisis. Several also described colleagues who had not managed that and had left the police. "If you apply for our department, you usually stay. Those who don't, they leave because they can't take it. I mean, they're exhausted." (F, investigator)

All participants agreed that if they were not able to take care of themselves, they would not be able to be supportive of a victim of rape either. Participating in the focus group was described as a good experience that had offered participants insights, allowed them to get in touch with their emotions, and given them opportunity to really get to know the colleagues who had participated in their same focus group. Discussing the benefits of participating in the focus group also made participants reflect on the supervision offered within the Authority. Some described the supervision as taking place in groups that were too large to allow them to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and emotions as they could do in the smaller focus group. Some participants also stressed the benefits of having time to focus on the concept of rape and various aspects of their work with victims of rape in a focus group that allowed more openness than other settings.

(1) This has been a mix of debriefing, being allowed to listen to your colleagues and talk about your emotions and situations we've encountered and... to be allowed to express your opinions and be given new thoughts to ponder. /.../ (2) In addition, the focus on rapes, that we were allowed to focus on that. We're not allowed to do that very often. (F, investigators)

### Discussion

All participants stressed their wish to be empathic and supportive of the women they met. They described their work as highly demanding due to the different needs of the different women and their awareness of the risk of re-victimization. However, they also described lacking the prerequisites to be supportive and professional, and it seemed they felt they were working against a headwind as they expressed frustration and sometimes resignation.



Meeting with women who reported rape left them struggling to find a balance between empathy and professionalism. The sadness of confronting stories of destructive sexuality and meeting with women who had been repeatedly exposed to violence exhausted them emotionally and led to them becoming more cynical. All participants stressed the importance of allowing themselves to show emotions—not only to confirm the woman’s experience but also partly to release some of their own sorrow. However, they also described the expectation that police officers should be tough, which made it hard for them to talk about how their work affected them.

The quoted participant’s wish for women to know that “at least I tried” captures much of the discussion in the focus groups. Participants described how violence against women was not a priority in the Police Authority or in Swedish society in general. Consequently, participants reported lacking the necessary training and infrastructure to be supportive and professional in their meetings with women who report rape. Participants described the task of being empathic and supportive as a personal attempt, dependent on individual officers. However, they also described lacking both the support they needed to stay motivated and feedback on whether their work had been helpful to the woman. In this discussion, findings are discussed in terms of officers’ frustration, officers’ risk of losing motivation, and the effects of officers’ frustration and lack of motivation on victims who seek their help.

### **Frustration and Its Consequences**

Several studies highlight the shortcomings of police responses to victims of sexual violence that leave victims feeling blamed, shamed, or disbelieved (Jordan 2001; Mulla 2014). In this study, however, officers demonstrated their wish to offer these women, if not legal justice, then at least some form of restoration. To encourage police officers to stay motivated to continue this work, we must address their level of frustration and their descriptions of their efforts as Sisyphean.

Feeling that one’s work is ineffective has been linked to a reduced sense of accomplishment and possibly to feelings of hopelessness (Stamm 2010). Previous research describes how police may not move forward with rape charges because they know most cases will not lead to conviction (Spencer et al. 2018). A procedural view of justice emphasizes the importance of police officers’ supporting the victim and giving her a voice in the juridical process, rather than attempting to secure a conviction (Koster et al. 2016). In this study, participants working as investigators described dealing with frustration by not overworking cases that they knew would never make it to court. In such cases, the effort not to “at least try” risks making the woman feel that she is not believed or that her case is not being investigated properly.

During interrogations, police must test complainants’ memory for clarity and consistency by asking them to recall details of the abuse. Previous studies show that such recollections may result in diminished self-esteem and feelings of guilt and shame in victims (e.g., Vaillancourt 2011). In this study, participants showed their awareness of the risk of interrogations having a detrimental effect on victims. However, they also described a great deal of frustration, and in some instances, resignation due to the lack of amenities in interrogation rooms, the lack of supplementary education, and the Authority’s inattention to the caretaking part of a police officer’s role. Such frustrations risk affecting the officer’s emotional motivation to make victims feel supported, and further, cause harm to officers who feel helpless within the existing restraints (Spencer et al. 2018). If this frustration is not addressed, there is a risk that the professionals will become cynical (Pearlman and Saakvitne 1995), less motivated to meet victims of rape with respect and empathy, and less able to conduct their work at their full potential.

### **Lack of Support and the Risk of Secondary Traumatization**

Participants described how meeting with raped women affected them on a personal level, sometimes exhausting them. Some also described how devoted colleagues of theirs had left the unit. Interacting with traumatized individuals can have a harmful effect on professionals, referred to as secondary traumatization (Greinacher et al. 2019). Access to professional support have been found to reduce the risk of secondary traumatization (Salston and Figley 2003), but participants in this study described a lack of support and their efforts to take care of themselves as an individual responsibility. They also noted that if they were not able to care for themselves, they would not be able to meet victims in a supporting way.

Previous research has highlighted some differences between female and male professionals who interact with victims of sexual abuse (Heatherton and Beardshell 1998). Other studies show that in comparison with men, female officers are at higher risk to develop PTSD and depression (e.g., Ménard et al. 2016). In several countries, professionals’ assignments to interrogate victims and suspects of rape are based on professional’s gender (e.g., Hodgson and Kelley 2002). Furthermore, victims of rape have reported feeling more comfortable meeting with a female professional (Temkin and Krahé 2008). Martin (2005) explains this as women sharing social influences that make them share a common understanding of rape. Prior studies have noted that there may be an expectation for female professionals to take on a greater responsibility for caring (Rudolfsson 2015),

making them more exposed to possible trauma. In this study, female participants described using identification as a strategy to support the victim. Participants also described female officers as more suited to respond to female victims. This may indicate a need for targeted support for female officers.

### Structural Barriers and the Importance of Communication

Officers with higher levels of education have been found to be less likely to endorse rape myths (Page 2007). However, from the perspective of victims, attempts to educate officers and to lower the number of cases who do not make it to court have not been successful (DuBois 2012). Other studies demonstrate the importance of making victims feel believed and supported through the legal process (e.g., Koster et al. 2016). Findings from this study seem to highlight the importance of communication over education.

Participants described their acquisition of knowledge as influenced either by their colleagues or by their “learning by doing.” They also stressed the benefits of being able to reflect upon and share their experiences in the focus groups. Rudolfsson and Tidefors (2013) reported the importance of allowing professionals to reflect with each other and validate each other’s experiences—something described as lacking by the participants in this study.

Participants described police culture as not allowing officers to show emotions, which has been noted in prior studies as well (e.g., Spencer and Patterson 2016). Participants working as investigators wished to work in pairs more often, and participants working as frontline officers described the benefits of being able to debrief with colleagues in the car home after an operation. Hence, giving officers the time and opportunity to reflect with their colleagues might be a way to further their ability to talk about and process the accumulated sorrow of encountering many victims throughout their career. Being able to reflect with colleagues could also relieve officers’ struggles to understand. Such communication could also serve to enhance guidelines, which participants described as not reflective of the reality of police work. Participants also described lacking feedback about whether their efforts had been helpful to the victims they encountered. This might indicate a need for better communication between police and victim support organizations. Such communication may help to inform police about what professional practices are detrimental, what practices victims perceive as helpful, and what practices police may justify as “at least trying.”

The lack of pre-requisites and support and the structural barriers reported by participants in this study seem to restrain their abilities to offer support to the women they meet. Jordan (2001) described police and victims as “worlds

apart” (pp. 701): while victims need to feel believed and supported by the legal process, police need to be emotionally distant, impartial, and focused on the court outcome. In this study, however, participants stressed the caretaking aspects of their role as police officers and their wish to support the woman, make women feel believed, and demonstrate that they have tried their best. However, they also described how these goals were not valued by the Authority. Their efforts to take care of victims, and to take care of themselves, seemed therefore to depend on the individual officer, exposing both officers and the women who seek their help to arbitrary decisions based on general rules and intuition.

### Methodological Reflections

The decision to focus on female victims in this project was due partly to the availability of specific women’s gynaecological examinations and partly to the acknowledged fact that the vast majority of rape victims are female (Brå 2019). The material was analyzed according to inductive thematic analysis, which is a flexible approach essentially independent of theoretical or epistemological approaches (Braun and Clarke 2006). Both frontline officers and investigators were included in this study. Previous research has shown that police culture is affected most by higher ranking officers (Farkas and Manning 1997). In the analysis, the focus was to identify themes pertaining to all participants; if a finding pertained more to one of the participating groups this was highlighted. Furthermore, participants were open about their criticisms of the Swedish Police Authority, and some expressed concern if they could be recognized in written reports. Due to confidentiality considerations, no detailed descriptions of the participants’ training and duties within the Authority are given.

Focus groups can help stimulate participants to discuss their experiences and feelings with others. Focus groups also have the advantage of allowing participants to contradict and question each other’s opinions, which is less likely to occur in an interview situation (Millward 2006). However, focus groups might also make some participants reluctant to disclose their personal experiences and feelings to other participants. As the participants in this study described a police culture in which showing emotions was not encouraged, individual interviews might have been more suited to allow participants to open up. In this study, however, one person was interviewed separately. Although some differences between the focus groups and the individual interview were noted in the analysis, the sample is too small to draw any general conclusions on the effect of the two different ways of gathering data. In addition, participants in the focus groups seemed to be open with their feelings and they wished for more such conversations.

Studies on sexual matters may suffer selection-bias as those who are willing to participate tend to be more sexually liberal and open than those who refuse (Plaud et al. 1999). In this study, it is also likely that participants were more feminist than police officers are in general. Previous research has shown that participants are often likely to report what they think researchers want to hear (Randall et al. 2006). It is therefore important to note that the moderator being a woman and her background in psychology may have influenced what participants shared in the focus groups and/or the interpretation of the data.

Finally, just as participants described the hazards of working alone, there is a risk that this study, conducted by one researcher, may have unexamined or idiosyncratic flaws. However, the material and themes were discussed with two other researchers and these findings describe one version of Swedish police officers' experiences with women who have been raped and their personal suggestions for improvements to the recommended treatment of these women.

## Final Remark

Previous studies have found that women who report feel that being treated fairly and with respect by police is as important as the outcome of the case (Johnson 2015). Participants' motivation, their need for support, and their wishes to be better equipped to meet women who have been raped with support and compassion are, therefore, vitally important. Their criticism of failures in the system is a call for action. The author wish to thank the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority for funding this research. Also, thank you to an anonymous reviewer whose comments improved this work. Lastly, my warmest thank to the participants for sharing their thoughts and experiences with me.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by University of Gothenburg. This study was funded by the Swedish Crime Victim Compensation and Support Authority (grant no. 3108/18).

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate** This study was ethically reviewed and approved by the regional ethical board in Gothenburg (ref. no. 883 18). All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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