Breaking the Silence: Women's Experiences of Christian Gender and Sexuality and Sexual Assault

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Abstract

Women survivors of sexual assault who have been exposed to Christian teachings often grapple with religious narratives that shape how they interpret their experience and heal from the assault. Previous qualitative research has examined how survivors of sexual assault are impacted by Christian teachings about sexuality or gender in specific populations (e.g. Christian denominations, those abused by clergy, etc.), but has yet to examine the similarities and differences between experiences of women from different denominations or those assaulted by non-clergy or clergy members. This study conducted semi-structured interviews with five women who self-identified as survivors of sexual assault, whether by clergy or other individuals, and who were also exposed to Christian teachings on sexuality or gender. Following an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the interviews were analyzed to explore how the participants made meaning of their experiences. Five superordinate themes emerged from the interviews: Vulnerability, Perceptions, Impacts, Navigating Disclosure, and Pathways to Healing. These findings were discussed through a feminist theory of trauma as a model for how psychotherapists can best support this population.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Research and Statistics Division has found that 3.7% of women in Canada have experienced sexual assault. This is significantly higher than men, as 87% of self-reported incidents of sexual assault are assaults against women (Government of Canada, 2017). While other reasons may account for some of this discrepancy (such as men experiencing higher levels of shame around sexual assault and therefore being less likely to report it), it is clear that sexual assault is likely more prevalent for women, making it imperative to understand the experience from women's perspectives.

The experience of sexual assault can be traumatic and have lasting impacts. The emotional impacts can be immense, including feelings of disgust, anger, and fear (Rosenthal et al., 2024). Women also often experience shame about themselves after an assault (Vidal & Petrak, 2007), as well as a sense of mental contamination (feelings of dirtiness without physical reasons) which can be triggered in many different situations (Tipsword et al., 2025). Certain

emotions and interpretations, or appraisals, of the event can contribute to greater likelihood of PTSD symptoms; self-blame, for example, is strongly correlated to depression (DePrince et al., 2011). A review of literature researching psychosocial impacts on women following sexual assault found that the main outcomes found were depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol dependence, and sleep disorders (Serrano-Rodríguez et al., 2025). Sexual assault, then, is an experience that can have severe negative consequences on women.

These impacts of sexual assault can vary based on factors such as trauma appraisals, social support, and coping strategies. What is needed for healing is influenced by social support, culture, and beliefs (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Therefore, a woman's cultural identity and community will influence her experience of sexual assault. Because of this, it is imperative to examine the experience of sexual assault in different cultures and belief systems. This makes it important to study Canadian women, but also raises the need to narrow the population much further to one of the many different cultural and religious groups in Canada.

In Canada, it is estimated that 53.3% of the population identify as Christian (Government of Canada, 2023). This makes it an important religion to study when it comes to understanding how women in Canada of certain belief systems experience sexual assault. Christianity has many explicit beliefs about sexuality and gender that may impact women's experience of sexuality assault in their vulnerability to assault, their appraisals of the event, and social support following the experience. To facilitate improved mental health care for female survivors of sexual assault, it is necessary to explore women's lived experience of this traumatic phenomenon and Christian gender and sexual teachings.

Studies have found connections between Christian teachings on gender and sexuality, also known as "purity culture," and beliefs about sexual assault, known as "rape myths." Purity culture refers to a set of beliefs and sociocultural norms within Christianity that glorifies female virginity, teaches abstinence outside of marriage, and faults women for pre-marital sex (Howard, 2023; Klement et al., 2022; McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Rape myths are "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (Burt, 1980, p. 217). Research shows that people who hold purity culture beliefs are less likely to report sexual abuse (Owens et al., 2021), and that purity culture beliefs are deeply connected to and promote rape myths (Barnett et al., 2018; Blyth, 2021; Klement et al., 2022). The strong intersection between purity culture and rape myths found in quantitative research makes it imperative to hear the stories of women who have experienced sexual abuse and understand how these ideologies impacted them.

The results of this study will provide important insights for mental health workers. In addition to training in working with trauma, therapists need to understand the unique challenges faced by women who also have a Christian background in healing from sexual assault. Additionally, the study will provide a foundation for future research. Because it examines the breadth of women's experience of trauma (including vulnerability to abuse, experience of the trauma, healing after the trauma), the results have the potential to inspire future research that can more narrowly examine different parts of the experience.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore what meaning women who have been exposed to Christian teachings about sexuality and/or gender ascribe to the experience of sexual assault. At this stage in the research, the central phenomenon will generally be described as the experiences surrounding sexual assault for women in this population, including

what lead to the assault, how it was perceived and how this perception influenced views of self and others, and the healing process after the assault.

The central question being asked is: What are the beliefs about gender and sexuality that women received from a Christian environment and how do they impact how they make meaning of and heal from sexual assault? To explore this question, these are the subquestions that will be addressed: 1) What factors led to vulnerability to being sexually assaulted or care received afterwards? 2) How did the participant's experience of sexual assault impact how they viewed themselves? 3) How did the participant become aware that what happened to her was sexual assault? 4) What meaning did being sexually assaulted have for her? 5) How did being sexually assaulted impact the participant's relationship to Christianity? 6) What has the participant found meaningful for her healing?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Christian Purity Culture

The phenomenon known as "Christian purity culture" has recently been a subject of discussion in both popular culture and academia. The beliefs and practices that define purity culture developed from ancient customs regarding female sexuality and gender roles. In *The Chastity Plot*, a book outlining the history of Christianity's influence on sexual behaviour, During (2021) notes that Greco-Roman beliefs emphasized virtues of modesty and temperance. In early Christianity, Christians believed that sexual abstinence was necessary at the least before marriage, but preferred abstinence in general (Lillis, 2022). Sexual purity movements that aimed to maintain Anglo-Saxon power were also prominent in the 19th century (Moslener, 2015).

While different movements of purity culture can be seen throughout history, the beliefs and practices that have come to be colloquially known as "purity culture" related to Christianity emerged in the late 20th century. In response to the sexual revolution, Christians adjusted their approach to preaching sexual values (Moslener, 2015). Specifically, they moved from a sacrifice-based abstinence movement to one that emphasized self-worth, sexual satisfaction, and marital happiness (Klein, 2018) and that focused on public declarations of one's commitment to chastity, which turned sexuality into a political tool (Moslener, 2015).

Three key movements defined modern purity culture: True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing, and Joshua Harris's (1997) book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Relationships and Romance*. True Love Waits was a sex education campaign introduced in 1987 by the Southern Baptist Convention; it encouraged youth to sign commitments to save sex until marriage at rallies and youth groups (Howard, 2023). Although it began as a Southern Baptist program, it quickly became a non-denominational, national movement (Moslener, 2015). Shortly after, Silver Ring Thing was founded in 1995 by youth ministers; the movement encouraged teenagers to purchase rings as a sign of their commitment to virginity until marriage (Moslener, 2015). Teachings purported that saving sex until marriage would result in a blissful sexual experience within marriage, while premarital sexual activity was seen as damaging to individuals and their future marriages (Gardner, 2011). While both True Love Waits and Silver Ring Thing helped paint the landscape of Christian purity culture, Joshua Harris's 1997 handbook on Christian dating also shaped the views of many young people (Howard, 2023). Harris promoted abstinence, strict physical boundaries before marriage, traditional gender roles, and "courting" with the intent of marriage (Harris, 1997).

All three movements shared common views on gender and sexual behaviour that define Christian purity culture.

Complementarianism

One of the core tenets of purity culture is about the traditional Christian views on gender, known as complementarianism, which is the view that men and women have different roles due to their biological differences (Klement & Sagarin, 2017). This concept is called gender essentialism (Klement & Sagarin, 2017) and results in women being under the authority of men in the family structure (Howard, 2023). These views are espoused in Christian dating books where young women are encouraged to act meekly, to step back and allow men to lead; encouraged to stay home and care for their families while men "conquer and save the world" (Lookadoo & DiMarco, 2003, pp. 19-20, as cited by Klement & Sagarin, 2017). In their analysis of Christian dating books, Klement and Sagarin (2017) discuss how, based on these gender differences, there is a persistent message in those writings that men are always looking for something sexual from women, always acting out of this self-interest.

Virginity

While saving sex for marriage is the concept that is perhaps most often associated with purity culture, a more subtle, but equally strong, emphasis is placed on the value of virginity, particularly for women (Owens et al., 2021). In Christian discussions on saving sex for marriage, metaphors are often used to describe the way women are damaged if they have premarital sex, such as being a chewed-up piece of gum (Owens et al., 2021). These concepts are not only damaging to women's self-worth but also perpetuate the narrative that women are objects; they rob women of sexual agency (Howard, 2023). One of the prominent messages is that women are not only damaged <u>as individuals</u> if they engage in premarital sex, they are also damaged as they

relate to their future husband, since “their virginity belongs to their husbands” (Klement & Sagarin, 2017, p. 213). This has a dangerous undertone since it implies that a woman’s body is not her own (Owens et al., 2021). Along with the concept of saving all sexual activity until marriage is a lack of education about consent; since there is an expectation that women will not engage in sexual activity, there is no need to teach them how they would engage in such activity safely (Owens et al., 2021).

Modesty

Modesty is a central concept taught to girls and women in purity culture, and includes how to speak, behave, and dress (Owens et al., 2021). In her book *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free*, Linda Kay Klein (2018) shares a personal story about how a female friend was rebuked by a leader in a youth group for being too “loud,” which was considered immodest behaviour for a girl. Klement and Sagarin (2017) found that in Christian dating books, men are portrayed to be out of control of their sexuality, and that the encouraged antidote for this is for women to dress in a way that will not tempt men to sin (Owens et al., 2021). If anything sexual outside of marriage occurs, women are faulted for the sinful act (Klement & Sagarin, 2017). Any sexual activity must have happened because a woman was acting in a way that was not modest; men are not blamed since they are seen as not having control of themselves (Klement & Sagarin, 2017). Because women are taught that their bodies can be a danger to men, women learn to see their bodies as things to be feared, which can lead to a complex relationship with one’s body (McKinzie & Richards, 2022).

The teachings of purity culture come packaged with beliefs about gender roles and sexuality that, for many, do not result in the freedom and pleasure that were promised as a reward for following the teachings (Klein, 2018). For many women, internalizing purity culture

ideology has resulted in confusion, particularly surrounding belief in rape myths that took years to untangle (McKinzie & Richards, 2022).

Rape Myths

To show the connection between purity culture beliefs and rape myths, the concept of rape myth itself needs to be clearly defined. Early works that touched on rape myths emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Clark and Lewis' (1977) *Rape: The price of coercive sexuality* was a controversial book which brought discussions about rape to the public and academic worlds, debunking the myth that the majority of rape accusations were false (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1979). Research that soon followed was a seminal work by Burt that has been named a "landmark paper" on rape myths (Klement & Sagarin, 2017), which defined the concept of a rape myth as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (Burt, 1980, p. 217). However, given the imprecise nature of this definition, in their work reviewing the measures of rape myth belief scales, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) offer this more detailed description: "Rape myths are attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women" (p. 134). These authors offered two examples of the most common rape myths: that women lie about being assaulted, and that only women who are sexually promiscuous get raped, implying the assault was in some way their fault (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). While this definition offers more precision than Burt's (1980), it perpetuates the idea that only women are raped by only men. A contemporary, non-discriminatory conceptualization of rape myths can be found from Johnson et al. (2023): "Rape myths are false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and/or perpetrators of rape that perpetuate a culture where sexual violence is excused" (p. 206).

Research shows that there is a connection between belief in rape myths and other harmful attitudes. As early as 1980, Burt found connections between acceptance of rape myths and other values, such as the correlation between rape myth acceptance and a belief in sex role stereotypes (Burt, 1980). This study found that rape myth acceptance positively correlates to sexual conservatism (belief that the only acceptable sex is heterosexual sex within the context of marriage), adversarial sexual beliefs (belief that all sex is exploitative on some level), and acceptance of interpersonal violence (belief that violence is an acceptable action to get something in society) (Burt, 1980). A more recent meta-analysis of the data around rape myth acceptance discovered that this attitude was strongly correlated with hostile sexism towards women, and that a significantly greater number of men held rape myth beliefs than women (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010).

Christian Purity Culture and Rape Myths

A growing body of research has identified links between religiosity and rape myths. Prina and Schatz-Stevens (2020) conducted a quantitative study with 399 participants using questionnaires and surveys and found that religiosity was a strong predictor of rape myth acceptance. While the participant sample did include a variety of religions, 56.4% of Italians and 62.4% of Americans identified as Christian, while only 1.1% of Italians and 8.3% of Americans were from other religions, 3.3% of Italians and 3.2% of Americans identified as spiritual, .6% of Italians and .5% of Americans did not report their religious affiliation, and the remainder reported being atheist. Another study had similar results, finding that among 653 university students, being Roman Catholic or Protestant was correlated to rape myth acceptance even when controlling for conservative political views (Barnett et al., 2018).

However, not all research has shown such clear connections between religiosity and rape myths. Navarro and Tewksbury's (2018) study found that in a sample of 503 people, there is no correlation between being Baptist or Presbyterian and belief in rape myth, but that an average Catholic does accept rape myths, whereas a highly religious Catholic is more likely to reject rape myths. Authors of the study suggest that religiosity only has an indirect connection to rape myth acceptance, and that benevolent sexism and sex role stereotypes are key factors that increase rape myths in religion. Benevolent sexism is a term defined by Glick and Fisk (1996) to delineate sexist attitudes and behaviours that come from stereotypes about women that are not inherently negative but have harmful consequences (e.g. women make excellent wives and mothers, but do not excel in the workplace).

Moving beyond studying religiosity and rape myths, Owens et al. (2021) specifically examined the relationship between purity culture beliefs found in some Christian denominations and beliefs in rape myths. Through surveys and questionnaires among 99 individuals, the researchers found a strong correlation between purity culture and rape myth beliefs. In a series of five studies, Klement et al. (2022) found that there is a correlation between the ideas found in purity culture and those seen in rape myths. Furthermore, they discovered that victim-blaming is likely to be present when purity culture beliefs and rape myth beliefs exist concurrently (Klement et al., 2022).

Not only has research been done with individuals to examine the relationship between purity culture beliefs, religiosity, and rape myths, qualitative research has also been conducted on Christian materials themselves to look for messages that support rape myths in Christian content. For example, Blyth (2021) studied annotated Bibles marketed towards teen girls and found themes of modesty, purity, and sexual passivity, all of which reinforced narratives that women

are responsible for men's sexual behaviour. Klement and Sagarin used content analysis to study Christian dating books written for women and also found themes that are linked to rape culture, including "women are responsible for sexual violence that men perpetrate; women should expect and accept sexual violence as a normal part of life; and women who are not submissive should be derogated" (Klement & Sagarin, 2017, p. 205). Moon and Reger studied Chrisitan dating books directed towards both sexes and found attitudes that are linked to rape myth acceptance, including benevolent sexism and traditional role stereotypes, and observed that there was a complete lack of discussion of autonomy and consent (Moon & Reger, 2014).

Overview of Qualitative Research with Survivors

Because of the connection between rape myths and purity culture, it is imperative to study how the two impact survivors of abuse. Several studies have been conducted on the experiences of survivors who were abused by members of the clergy. Pooler & Barros-Lane (2022) conducted a mixed-methods study to explore what adult women abused by religious authority figures found helpful to their healing and what factors increased their resilience. Through the responses of 159 women, the results of the study suggested that most women did not receive support from their churches following the abuse, but that personal faith in God was a resilience factor for healing (Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022). A literature review on clergy abuse identified a negative impact that rivaled parental sexual abuse and that loss of faith in God was a common theme (McGraw et al., 2019). A qualitative study among seven women found that experiences of sexual abuse by trusted clergy heavily impacted their faith in God and negatively affected them psychologically, sexually, and spiritually (Huson, 2002). In a similar qualitative study describing the experiences of five women sexually abused by Catholic priests, Prusak &

Schab (2022) found the spiritual impact of the abuse to be so severe that the researchers labelled it as “spiritual trauma” (p. 44).

While much of the consulted research in this area examines the intersection of religion and sexual abuse on survivors abused by clergy, two consulted studies have looked at survivors from Christian environments who were abused by non-clergy members. Whiteley and Morrow (2021) examined how gendered messages about femininity impacted the healing of childhood sexual abuse survivors who were part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints abused by non-clergy members. Using a grounded theory design, the study identified major themes among the fourteen participants’ responses, which included themes such as “women are responsible for men’s sexual desires,” “women must protect their purity,” and “a woman’s value is connected to her virginity” (p. 301-303). Another study examined the impact of purity culture on sexual abuse survivors abused by non-clergy specifically in a white, Evangelical context, focusing on the way that ideologies and institutions interact to limit female agency and perpetuate abuse (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Results of the 32 interviews found a theme of women being blamed if they shared what happened to them, ultimately being held responsible for the actions of their male abusers (McKinzie & Richards, 2022).

Purpose of the Study

There is a comprehensive research base published in psychology on female survivors impacted by Christian purity culture. However, the consulted research has examined this experience in populations that are limited in scope. Previous studies looked at the experience of either women abused by Christian clergy (Huson, 2002; McGraw et al., 2019; Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022; Prusak & Schab, 2022) or not abused by clergy (Whiteley, 2019; McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Additionally, among the consulted research with those not abused by clergy, the

population was further narrowed to specific Christian denominations like Evangelicalism (McKinzie & Richards, 2022) or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Whiteley, 2019).

This study will contribute to the current research in an important way by using a broad population. It will include all women who experienced sexual abuse (whether the abuse was perpetrated by clergy or not) and were exposed to teaching about sexuality from any Christian denomination. This will allow the conclusions from the study to be applied to a greater number of women, regardless of the identity of the abuser or the specific Christian denomination.

It is hoped that this study will provide valuable insight to all those who care for female survivors impacted by Christian teachings on sexuality on what this experience is like. The researcher aims to contribute to a better understanding on how to provide treatment and support.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodology used for the study and discusses the rationale behind the chosen method. Additionally, it presents the process of finding participants and collecting data. Finally, given the qualitative nature of the study, the chapter includes the researcher's own positionality and reflexivity throughout the research process.

Qualitative Method

This study used a qualitative method, which provides an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative methodology allows the researcher to answer a research question "addressing the meaning individuals or group ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 8). This study explored the experience of female survivors of sexual assault who were exposed to Christian teachings on gender or

sexuality. The purpose of the qualitative method is to allow readers of the research to say, "I understand better [now] what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). The five most common types of qualitative research listed by Creswell and Poth (2018) are: narrative research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, case study research, and phenomenological research, the latter of which was used for this study.

Interpretive Phenomenological Approach

This study was conducted through a type of qualitative method known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In IPA, the researcher chooses a phenomenon that is part of the human experience and, after collecting data from different participants who went through the phenomenon, paints a picture about what the phenomenon is like (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The emphasis is on describing not just the phenomenon itself, but the "lived experiences" (Creswell, 2018, p. 57) of the participant, aiming to answer "what?" and "how?" (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher analyzes each experience individually and then identifies common themes among the experiences and expounds on differences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Some researchers see IPA as the most "participant-oriented" method of qualitative research, a way "that shows respect and sensitivity" to participants (Alase, 2017, p. 10). IPA's purpose is "to investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 9).

IPA has strong philosophical underpinnings, and, as Creswell (2018) states, at least a basic understanding of these philosophies is necessary to use this methodology. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) state that the three key principles IPA is based on are phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideology. Husserl first developed the idea of phenomenology, which focused on understanding how individuals describe and make meaning of their own experiences, instead of how an individual's experiences fit into a preconceived set of criteria established by a

researcher (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This idea was developed further by Heidegger, who introduced to phenomenology the idea of hermeneutics, which comes from a Greek word meaning "to interpret" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8). This introduces the idea of a "double hermeneutic": first, the participant puts words to what they experienced, thereby "interpreting" their experience, and second, the researcher in turn puts words to the participant's experience and makes meaning of it, thereby also "interpreting" the experience for a second time (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Finally, IPA maintains an idiographic approach, which means that it aims to uncover the experiences of individuals in their uniqueness instead of searching to establish universal principles (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

One of the key parts of the process in IPA is bracketing (Smith et al., 2012). Bracketing, on the part of the researcher, is the process of managing their own preconceived ideas, assumptions, and biases to prevent them from influencing the interview process or data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). However, Smith et al. (2012) take this idea further by encouraging researchers to use a "cyclical approach" to bracketing. They see it as impossible to identify all of one's preconceived ideas before starting the research process, and that instead researchers should engage in continual reflexive thinking as they interview participants and analyze the data, and that by doing so they can more successfully keep their own ideas out of their interpretation of the participants' experiences.

Rationale for Using IPA

IPA is an approach that aims to understand "how people make sense of major life experiences" (Smith et al., 2012, p.1). The goal of this study was to understand what the experience of sexual assault was like for women who learned about Christian teachings on sexuality or gender. Sexual assault can be a significant and impactful event in someone's life, so

using IPA was a method that aligned with the purpose of the study. Additionally, because IPA is focused on the meaning individuals make of their experiences, it is particularly fitting for the study's population since the study examines how the participants made sense of their experiences considering Christian expectations around sexuality and gender.

Using IPA was also appropriate for the study because of its idiographic nature. Instead of looking for general principles, the aim of this study was to explore the unique experiences of individuals and compare their similarities and differences. Because IPA is dedicated to "the detailed examination of the particular case" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 3), it fit within the scope of the study and its aims.

A Feminist Theoretical Framework

Feminist theory examines women's unique situations and the context of those situations, often, not always, focusing on the power structures within the patriarchy that are limiting to women (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Research that uses a feminist framework shares three main concerns, which McHugh (2020) outlines as "giving voice to women's lives and experiences, overcoming gender inequities at the personal and social level, and improving women's opportunities and the quality of women's lives" (p. 201).

The researcher chose to conduct the first stages of the study, the literature review and data collection, without a theoretical framework and instead approach the interviews from an open and exploratory perspective. This allowed the participants themselves through the interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology to inform the choice of theoretical framework that would be used to analyse the data and write the study. Throughout the course of the interview process, it became clear that participants' stories centered around power in relationships and institutions, which is core to feminist theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Because sexual assault can be a traumatic event, an analysis process would benefit the most through a feminist theory of trauma. Historically, feminist and trauma theories are strongly linked (Brown, 2004). The introduction of interpersonal trauma as a diagnosis occurred as a result of feminist perspectives (Herman, 1997). Because of this, "trauma treatment generally implicitly embodies many feminist paradigms, even when they are not specifically identified as such" (Brown, 2004, p. 464). While there are specific feminist theories of trauma such as Freyd's (1996) theory of betrayal trauma, the feminist trauma paradigm can be applied to trauma in general and explores the context in which trauma is experienced in a person's life, conducts a political analysis around the trauma, focuses on empowering the individual, and addresses existential and spiritual issues that are tied to the trauma (Brown, 2004).

At the heart of this study is the desire to "conduct research that is transformative for women" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 34), a purpose central to a feminist framework. Through a feminist framework, the study explores the way women survivors of sexual assault conceptualize gendered power dynamics and sexual expectations as part of their stories. Feminist trauma theory allows for the examination of not just the experience of trauma but also the socio-political context of the trauma. Ultimately, this exploration enriches the understanding of the participants' meaning-making, making it well-suited for the study's purpose, topic, and interpretative phenomenological methodology.

Ethical Considerations

The topic of sexual assault required careful consideration of ethical factors for the study. This study received approval from the Board of Ethics of Saint Paul University (see Appendix A). Before participants agreed to participate in the study, they were provided with an Invitation to Participate (see Appendix C) and a Consent Form (see Appendix D). These forms outlined the

risks of emotional or psychological distress that might arise from speaking about sexual assault and provided resources for crisis support and counselling. They also asserted that participation in the study was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time.

Because of the sensitive nature of the study, participants were assured that their information would be held confidentially. In the study, anonymity was ensured by assigning pseudonyms to the participants and excluding any identifying information. Pseudonyms were used in the data collection, analysis, and writing stages of the study. One participant in the study had concerns about how identifying factors would be anonymized; the researcher included her in the anonymization process by providing the participant with the sections of the thesis containing content from her interview and adjusting any identifying details as requested.

Participants

Selection Criteria

Participants were to be women 18 years of age or older who self-identified as being survivors of sexual assault and having been exposed to Christian teachings about sexuality or gender. Sexual assault is defined as "attempted or completed bodily contact, yet this contact can be either penetrative (rape) or nonpenetrative (e.g., grabbing genitals)" (O'Donohue & Schewe, 2019, p.3). Any denomination of Christianity (e.g. Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, etc.) was to be accepted for the study; participants must self-report as having been exposed to Christian teachings about sexuality or gender.

Because the study deals with gender-specific impacts of Christian teachings on women survivors, it is out of the scope of the study to explore how this impacts those who are not cisgender females or who do not identify as a woman. Therefore, potential candidates who identify as transgender or non-binary were excluded from the study.

Recruitment

Recruitment was done through four streams. The first was through advertisement at Saint Paul University through posters (see Appendix B) placed around campus. The second was through contacting three organizations throughout Ottawa that support female survivors of sexual assault (The Sexual Assault Support Centre of Ottawa, the Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre, and the Family Services Ottawa Anti-Violence Counselling Program) and requesting for them to advertise the study in their organizations. The third was through posters placed in Christian churches in the Ottawa area, specifically in women's washrooms due to the sensitive nature of the topic to allow for privacy for interested individuals. Finally, a snowballing method was used by the researcher, who contacted colleagues, friends, and family members to ask them to send the study poster to potential candidates. Individuals were asked to contact the researcher by email or phone to ask questions about the study or sign up to participate.

Procedure

These were the steps taken for recruitment and data collection: (1) recruitment through the previously described streams; (2) Assessing for eligibility and sending the invitation to participate form; (3) Sending the consent form to interested and eligible candidates; (4) Upon receipt of the signed consent form, scheduling an interview time and date; (5) Completing an interview that lasted between 60-90 minutes.

Participant Demographics

Five participants participated in the study, which was a large enough sample to gain an understanding of the experience but small enough to analyze and describe the data in depth (Polkinghorne, 1989). The sample size fell into Smith et al.'s (2012) suggestion of three to six participants for an IPA study. The women who were recruited ranged from ages 24 to 47, with a

mean age of 35. All participants were residents of Canada. As per the selection criteria, each participant had some self-reported exposure to Christian teachings on sexuality and/or gender. The Christian denominations where the participants received these teachings were varied. Two participants attended a Catholic church. One participant attended a Baptist church but was also exposed to other Protestant denominations. Another participant was exposed to a number of different denominations, which were Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal, and non-denominational. Lastly, another participant was involved in Catholic and Protestant denominations. The participants also self-reported as having experienced sexual assault at least once. One participant reported having been sexually assaulted once in her life, one participant reported being sexually assaulted twice, two participants three times, and one participant reported that she was assaulted numerous times and could not remember the exact number.

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. This method ensured that continuity was maintained among different participants, allowing the researcher to explore certain topics more deeply based on what participants shared (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Before the interview, the researcher gave each participant an opportunity to ask questions. During the interview, the researcher developed rapport with the participant by using active listening and, because of the sensitive nature of the interview topic, informed the participant that she could stop the interview at any time and monitored the participant for signs of discomfort or distress using the researcher's clinical judgement (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). At the place in the interview where the researcher asks questions about the participant's experience of sexual assault, the researcher prefaced these questions by reminding the participant that they could skip a question or pause the interview at any time. An audio recording was made of each interview.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for IPA is flexible and dynamic, with no single prescribed method but instead a focus on how participants make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2012). While Smith et al. (2012) emphasize that "there is no clear right or wrong way of conducting this sort of analysis" (p. 80), this study followed the steps outlined by the same authors which are designed to provide structure for new researchers within a flexible approach (Smith et al., 2012).

The first step outlined by Smith et al. (2012) is the "reading and re-reading" (p. 82) of a single transcript. First, the researcher edited the transcription of the interview. The initial transcription was created through Otter.ai, but due to a margin of error within the program the researcher listened to the recording and carefully edited the transcript for accuracy. This process allowed the researcher to become familiar with the cadence of the participant's voice, a familiarity which Smith et al. (2012) believe "assists with a more complete analysis" (p. 82). The researcher then read the transcript a second time without the recording, this time noting the narrative flow of the participant. During this reading and re-reading process, the researcher recorded initial impressions or personal reflections, which Smith et al. (2012) encourage in order to bracket one's own ideas and immerse oneself in the world of the participant.

The next step encouraged by Smith et al. (2012) is an "initial noting" stage (p. 83). In this stage, the researcher took exploratory notes on the participant transcript. This process is meant to facilitate understanding of how the participants ascribe meaning to their lives (Smith et al., 2012). Smith et al. (2012) suggest that these notes can focus on three different categories of observation: descriptive (summarizing content), linguistic (examining the participant's use of

language), and conceptual (connecting the interview to theories). These exploratory notes provided the basis for the next step of analysis.

The third step of the analysis was to develop concise emergent themes based off of the exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2012). Smith et al. (2012) state, “Themes are usually expressed as phrases which speak to the psychological essence of the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual” (p. 92). Because these themes were based off the exploratory notes, they contain both a reflection of the participant’s own words and the researcher’s interpretation of the participant’s words, creating “a synergistic process of description and interpretation” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 92). At the completion of this step, the participant’s interview was fully coded with emergent themes.

The next step involved grouping the emergent themes together under “superordinate themes” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 100). The goal of this stage, as expressed by Smith et al. (2012), was to create “a structure which allows you to point to all of the most interesting and important aspects of your participant’s account” (p. 96). This involved examining the emergent themes and grouping together those that related to each other. Themes that were not related to the research question were discarded, while the salient participant responses were organized and re-organized until the researcher developed superordinate theme titles to represent the grouped themes, reaching a structure that comprehensively represented the participant’s story.

After the four first steps (reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, and creating superordinate themes) had been completed for one participant, the researcher proceeded to repeat these steps with each of the four remaining participants. Smith et al. (2012) note that it is important (to the extent is possible) for a researcher to bracket their

knowledge of the previous participant's superordinate themes so that they approach the next participant's transcript with an openness to seeing new themes.

After superordinate themes were developed for each of the participants, the researcher completed the final step of analysis, which Smith et al. (2012) describe as "looking for patterns across cases" (p. 101). In this step, the researcher compared the superordinate themes from the participants to look for commonalities between them. Because of the dynamic nature of this type of analysis, this step also involved regrouping and renaming some themes, what Smith et al. (2012) label, "a particularly creative task" (p. 101) within the analysis process. The researcher structured superordinate themes that have flexibility within them to express the unique experiences of the participants.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher considered reflexivity to be a key part of the research process. Reflexivity can be defined as the, "turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation" (Berger, 2015). The researcher acknowledges her own positionality as a woman who has experienced sexual assault and been exposed to Christian sexual and gender teachings.

According to Berger (2015), sharing a similar experience as the group you are studying comes with advantages and disadvantages. Because the researcher is a woman, participants may have felt more comfortable speaking to another woman about their experiences. As someone who is familiar with Christianity, the researcher came to the interview with understanding that facilitated interview depth with the participants. This experience can be summarized in Berger's (2015) words concerning sharing a positionality with participants: "I was able to hear the unsaid,

probe more efficiently, and ferret out hints that others might miss" (p. 223). Additionally, the researcher's connections to and familiarity with various Christian communities facilitated the recruitment of participants.

However, there are potential difficulties that arise when the researcher meets the same participation criteria as those in the study. One risk is that the researcher may make assumptions about the participants based on their own experience, impose their own values, and interpret data through their own biases (Drake, 2009). Because of this, the use of IPA as a methodology assisted in avoiding this because of its explicit acknowledgement that there is a double hermeneutic in the method, that the participant is interpreting their own experience *and* the researcher is interpreting the participant's response (Smith et al., 2012). As far as it was possible, the researcher bracketed out her own preconceptions through journalling throughout the process and consulting with colleagues. The researcher's thesis supervisor was also consulted during the data analysis stages. Additionally, the researcher applied her clinical training as a psychotherapist in listening and exploring to her interviews with participants, asking open-ended and clarifying questions with the aim to understand the unique experience of each participant while bracketing her own assumptions.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Part 1 – Individual Participant Experiences

In the first part of this chapter, a summary of each of the participants' stories will be presented individually. Because the participants' experiences were varied and complex, discussing each experience individually here will increase clarity during the discussion of the superordinate themes in Part 2. Furthermore, telling each story individually honours the story of

each participant who chose to contribute to the study (Payne, 2021). The summaries will be presented in the order in which the participants were interviewed.

Table 1: Summary of participant demographics

	Age range	**Denominations experienced**	**Number of times sexually assaulted**	**Relationship to abuser(s)**	**Cited therapy as healing**
Morgan	20-29	Catholic	3	Boyfriend, friend, stranger	Yes
Katherine	40-49	Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal, Non-denominational	Many times; exact number not remembered	Family members, family friends, strangers	Yes
Ivy	30-39	Baptist, other Protestant denominations	2	Friend, pastor	No
Mary	40-49	Catholic, other Protestant denominations	1	Boyfriend	Yes
Rachel	20-29	Catholic	2	Friend, instructor	No

Morgan

Morgan is in her mid-twenties and grew up with both Roman Catholicism and Indigenous spirituality. Catholicism came from her father, who was Catholic; Morgan was involved in the religion through being educated at a Catholic school and going to weekly church and Sunday school. Her mother was Indigenous and she learned about traditional Indigenous spirituality from her mother and her maternal family.

Morgan recalls learning about sexuality at Catholic school from a male-centered perspective. Based on this education, she believed that sex was meant for men's pleasure and that her role as a woman was to ensure that pleasure for a man. Not only that, but she believed she needed to promote a man's pleasure even if it meant ignoring her own discomfort or aversion. She remembers that she was never taught about consent, and that while she knew about sexual assault, she thought it was something that could only happen from a stranger.

Morgan experienced sexual assault several different times as a teenager and young adult. Her first experience was with a boyfriend where she remembers various times she went along with sexual activity when she did not want to. At the time she "did not think too deeply about it," but looking back, she sees it as sexual assault. The next time she was sexually assaulted was by a friend, and she vividly remembers feeling pressured, firmly saying she did not want to have sex, and then being raped. At the time, she felt violated and intense shame and disgust, but she did not have the language to name what had happened to her as sexual assault until she shared her experience with someone several years later. Lastly, she was sexually assaulted at a bar as a young adult by a man who grabbed her inappropriately. At that time in her life, she had the language to identify what happened as sexual assault.

Morgan explained that the Catholic teachings she had learned about sexuality and gender impacted her experience of sexual assault. While Morgan did believe in Catholic teachings as a child and adolescent, she gradually distanced herself from Catholic teachings as a teenager, eventually making a conscious choice to reject all organized religion as a young adult and holding anger towards the Catholic Church for the negative impact it had on her. Now, she has reconnected with Indigenous spiritual practices and has found the ways that women are viewed

to be healing after her experience within Catholicism. Indigenous spirituality, along with therapy and connecting with other survivors, are things that have helped her in her healing journey.

Katherine

Katherine is in her forties and identifies as a born-again charismatic Christian. As a child, she described herself as being born into a nominally Catholic household, but her family practiced witchcraft and "dark, Satanic ritual stuff." Katherine was severely sexually and physically abused as a child in her family of origin, and the sexual abuse continued throughout her childhood and adolescence when she was in foster care.

When she was 15 years old, she attended a Christian camp and had a profound spiritual experience where she gave her heart to Jesus and felt his unconditional love and became involved in a Baptist church. At another point in the interview, Katherine reflected on whether she was drawn to Christianity because she saw that women were in a subordinate, voiceless role in the church– a role that felt safe, for her familiarity to being an abuse victim. She recalled how sexuality was a taboo topic, and when it was talked about there was emphasis on saving sex until marriage, with guilt and shame surrounding any sort of sexual sin. In particular, she described a double-standard where sexual sins were tolerated in men but harshly condemned in women.

Dating as a Christian presented challenges to her because of her history of sexual abuse. Because of the emphasis on virginity, she felt like she was worthless to men since she was not a virgin anymore, despite not having had a choice. Although on some level she knew that the abuse she experienced was not her fault and was wrong, she struggled with blaming herself, trying to parse out what was her choice or not. The pain she was in led to substance use, eating disorders, and self-harm that only brought her further away from what was considered "good" and increased what "she could be rejected for" in Christian circles. She spoke about the pain

caused by well-meaning Christians who did not have the education to be counselling trauma survivors and mistook trauma responses for demonic activity.

Now, Katherine is the pastor of a Christian, non-denominational church and is passionate about bringing mental health awareness and spirituality together. While she still holds conservative views, she has found her voice as a woman in the church. She sees her experiences as having given her compassion for others that some Christians do not have and is vocal about loving people where they are at in all walks of life. For her, healing has come through prayer and her relationship with God, healthy relationships, and therapy.

Ivy

Ivy is in her early thirties and was raised in a "very Bible-based" Baptist church that held fundamentalist, conservative views. She recalls that her family devotedly attended church on Sundays, and often attended additional events such as night church and Sunday school until age 12. At that age, her parents divorced and church attendance became more sporadic, but she says, "the damage was done [laughs]", and she continued to pray and study the Bible on her own.

In a Christian context, Ivy learned about sexuality and gender from her mother (a Christian), the church she attended, and through watching Christian speakers online. She remembers learning about distinct gender roles for men and women, particularly within marriage and in the church. She also remembers learning about sexual purity and how she experienced guilt and shame for things she now looks back at as normal and innocuous. Ivy does not recall learning about consent or sexual assault, but did share an instance where she told her mom that one of her friends was feeling uncomfortable because of how her youth pastor was behaving, and her mom dismissed it as her friend being "overdramatic."

Ivy shared three instances of being sexually assaulted. The first was when she was touched sexually as a five-year-old by a child the same age. Because of the age of the child involved, Ivy shared she was not sure if it should be considered sexual assault, and the interviewer left it up to her to decide if she wanted to include it, and since it was an impactful experience for Ivy, she did choose to speak about it. The next experience of sexual assault was when she was 12 years old and was touched sexually by a friend without consent. Lastly, at the same age her adult youth pastor sexually assaulted her by touching her inappropriately.

In the latter two assaults, Ivy shared that in some ways her Christian education about sexual purity helped her identify that the actions of the offenders were wrong. On the other hand, they also induced an element of self-blame and wondering whether immodest dress or actions had contributed to others' behaviours.

Ivy described how, because her immediate response to the assaults was anger towards the other, she did not experience the shame that often accompanies sexual assault. Because of this, she shared that she did not need to work though healing in any way. She also added that her experiences of sexual harassment (not a topic addressed in the current study) have caused equal if not greater distress than sexual assault in her life. She no longer identifies as a Christian, instead looking at the Bible "like a bag of trail mix," holding onto what resonates with her and leaving the rest. She notes that being sexually assaulted did not impact her belief in Christianity, and that she blamed the individual offenders and not God.

Mary

Mary is in her forties and grew up in what she describes as "a very faithful and devout family." She was exposed to Catholicism and a range of Protestant denominations through

school, family, and church attendance. She shares that she was a “prayerful young person” who studied the Bible and viewed her Christian faith as central to her life and identity.

Her parents believed strongly in abstinence-only sex education and were advocates for abstinence-only education. Mary was withdrawn from sex education at school so the only sexual education she received was from her parents, who gave her basic information about the mechanics of sex but left her with very little information about male sexuality or sexual intercourse. She also describes learning about gender roles that were “very well defined,” with men being protecters and leaders, while women are nurturers and followers.

Mary shared that she was sexually assaulted by her boyfriend when she was a young adult. She described that they had not been sexually intimate beyond making out and that she believed that he, being the man in the relationship, would initiate a conversation about any other type of sexual intimacy. This left her shocked when he penetrated her without initiating a conversation or asking consent. Furthermore, she felt like she could not bring up the topic afterwards because in doing so she would violate her passive gender role.

For many years, Mary did not consider this experience to be rape because of the belief that because she was in a relationship with him it could not be. This perception changed as an adult after she learned about sexual consent and recognized that she was not asked for consent before penetration; she saw how her lack of knowledge about sex and the gendered role she played in the relationship contributed to her vulnerability. What has facilitated healing in her life from this sexual assault have been loving relationships where she is free to consent or not to sex without threatening the intimacy of the relationships, yoga and mindfulness, psychotherapy, and education around sexual consent. She expressed gratitude for being a part of this study as it allowed her to share a highly personal story in a way that protected her privacy and could help

mental health professionals provide support to women like herself in a way that she did not receive.

Rachel

Rachel is in her mid-twenties and grew up in a Roman Catholic family. While she attended Catholic school, she attributes most of her Catholic education and involvement to her family and attending Catholic talks and retreats. She went through a period of time as young adult where she left her faith, partially due to questions and struggles she had surrounding the Catholic Church's teachings about sexuality and how this impacted her after being sexually assaulted. She has since reconnected with Catholicism and sees her faith and relationship with God as a central part of her life.

She remembers learning implicitly that as a woman, she was meant to care for others' emotional needs and be passive. She also recalls that while she did learn that being sexually assaulted does not affect your purity, she did not learn about the concept of consent. She describes how some of the ways she learned about modesty emphasized valuing one's self-worth, while others portrayed female modesty as a way to protect men from the sin of lust. Similarly, she recalls learning about the sin of premarital sex in a way that promoted the positive value of sex and that welcomed individuals to repent if they did commit that sin, while others used objectifying analogies that implied that having premarital sex irrevocably lowered an individual's inherent worth.

Rachel had two experiences of sexual assault, both as a teenager. The first happened when she was sick at a party and a trusted friend grabbed her inappropriately without consent. Because she was drunk and wearing clothing she considered to be immodest, both of which went against Church teaching and her own personal values, she grappled with self-blame despite

knowing that he should not have touched her. The second time she was sexually assaulted was during a driving lesson when a male instructor touched her inappropriately. As with the other time she was assaulted, she grappled with self-blame and shame due to what she was wearing when it happened.

Rachel shared that reframing her beliefs around self-blame and logically assuring herself of the truth that she could not control someone else's actions have been helpful to healing. She also shared that her relationship with God has been central for her healing. She emphasized the importance of her Catholic faith in her life and expressed her hope that Catholic teachings on sexuality can be presented in a way that is compassionate, kind, and takes into account dealing with sexual assault.

Part 2: Displaying the Findings

Table 2: Summary of superordinate themes and subthemes

Superordinate Themes	Subthemes
Vulnerability	Lack of sexual education
	Exposure to victim-blaming narratives
	Internalized gendered powerlessness
Perceptions	Dual sense of offender accountability and self-blame
	Normalization
	Re-framing
Impacts	Emotional
	Worth

	Spiritual
Navigating Disclosure	Isolation
	Inhibiting factors
	Responses from others
Pathways to Healing	Sexuality and agency
	Connection
	Spirituality
	Therapy

Part 3: Explanation of Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: Vulnerability 1` hkn

This theme explores the ways in which the participants were vulnerable to sexual assault. Many participants shared that there was a lack of sexual education in their families, schools, and churches, particularly on sexual assault and consent, and that this increased their risk for sexual assault. Other participants spoke about victim-blaming narratives that left them more likely to blame themselves after assault, narratives that were often intertwined with Christian doctrinal teachings on gender and sexuality. Finally, several participants shared how their understanding of feminine gender roles imbued them with a learned voicelessness that left them more vulnerable to being assaulted. Research has found that a risk factor for sexual assault was "acceptance of rape myths and traditional beliefs about sex roles (e.g., men should pay for dates), which may engender women's passivity with men in sexual situations" (Ullman & Najdowski,

2011). This theme explores the ways that these factors intersect with participants' experiences of Christianity to increase vulnerability to sexual assault.

Lack of Sexual Education

All participants shared that they received little or no education on consent or sexual assault and some reported that they received inadequate sexual education. A study on Christian dating books found that there was a lack of meaningful discussion on consent and autonomy (Moon & Reger, 2014), something that was a common experience of the participants. A lack of knowledge about sexuality and consent leaves people without "basic information to keep themselves safe" (McKinzie & Richards, 2022) and is a factor in vulnerability to sexual assault.

Participants experienced a lack of comprehensive sex education. Morgan describes how she received an abstinence-only sex education approach from her Catholic school and was left with little information about sex. She states:

> We didn't learn anything about safe sex, nothing about like STDs, nothing about like protection. It was very much like, if you have sex before you're married, like you will go to hell, like it's not, it's not acceptable, so we're not going to talk about it, because it's just something that you shouldn't do. You should never do it.

Mary also had a very limited sexual education. Both her parents were devout Christians and believed in saving sex for marriage. Because of this, one of her parents was an advocate for implementing abstinence-only sex education in schools, and even after that curriculum began to be used, Mary's parents still did not give consent for her to receive sex education beyond curriculum on puberty at school. Mary shared her mother's description of sex:

> She explained to me that when a man and a woman are married and they want to have children, then the, the man and the woman, when you're in bed, then he can insert his

> penis inside her vagina, and then he will, there will be sperm that will fertilize her eggs, and they'll make a baby. And she said, but first she described how they would be kissing each other and petting each other, and they would be, you know, showing this physical affection for each other.

She shares that this explanation was perhaps more information than she even needed as a nine-year-old. However, she noted that this was the only sexual education she received, and therefore sexual knowledge she had, until she was raped as a young adult. She states, “But that was really it. That was my only sex talk….I really went in with no understanding of anything about male anatomy or arousal or, I, anything to do with, anything very much to do with, with intercourse.”

Katherine spoke about how in her Christian circles, people did not talk about sexuality beyond the teaching to avoid pre-marital sex. She shares:

> You know, a lot of things around sexuality were like toxic to even talk about. It was really, like a taboo topic. You don't really talk about it. It's not taught about very much either. It's kind of a topic that you stay away from, aside from them saying it's, you don't do anything outside of marriage, you know?

Learning about sexuality through a male-focused lens without any education on female pleasure left Morgan vulnerable to sexual assault. She shared that her Catholic school emphasized the importance of the male orgasm during sex to achieve conception (procreation having been presented as a central purpose to sex). However, the female orgasm was entirely absent from the sex education curriculum and for years Morgan believed it was a myth and that her role during sex was to please a man above all else. She describes:

> Even the education that we did get, it was very like, like, centered on, yeah, like, heterosexual relationships, but like, with an emphasis on like the man and like male

> pleasure. And it was all about like, like, we learned about like, the male orgasm, and how like that is like what like gives life like, like, that's a part of, yeah, like, that's a part of like, the process of like having a child and, like, the male has to have an orgasm.

In addition to absence of instruction on female pleasure, sexual consent was an area found lacking in the sexual education the participants received. Rachel shared that while she does recall being told that it is wrong for someone to pressure you to have sex with them, she expressed surprise that thinking back she does not remember ever learning about consent. She shares:

> Like, wow, not at all I feel like. I don't think, I don't think, I don't think I remember them mentioning it, like, at all. Like, yeah, they, they obviously talked about, like, oh, like, don't feel like, don't feel like you, you never need to go through with it. Like, if someone's pressuring you, you should, you like, you should break up with them and stuff like that. But like, they didn't go into like, you know, giving consent, or anything like that. I don't think they ever said the word consent. Okay, interesting, yeah.

Ivy does not remember being taught about consent either. She shares, “So I can't, I can't really remember teachings about sexual abuse or assault honestly, which I don't know if that's like, feels like, maybe an oversight, feels like, maybe it should have been talked about.”

Morgan also never learned about consent, from friends, parents, or through her Catholic sex education at school. She shares, “Because, yeah, there was no teachings of it anywhere, like, from nowhere, from not my not school, not friends, even, like, I don't really remember my parents ever talking to us about consent and, like, enthusiastic consent.”

Mary also did not receive any education on consent. Since her sexual education was within a frame of abstinence, there was an expectation of saying no to all sexual activity. When

asked if she learned about consent, she responded, “No, no, apart from, just say no, like, just stop early and avoid having sex, right?”

Some participants did share that they learned about sexual assault, but the conceptions with which they were provided were limited. Mary described how she learned about rape in the context of abortion debates, and from this gathered that rape “was just kind of that horrible, horrible violent attack.”

As a teenager, Morgan also understood sexual assault to be perpetrated by a stranger. She described, “My idea of like, rape and sexual assault at that time was like, you're walking down the street and like, a scary man that you don't know, like, takes you into an alley and, like, does whatever he wants.”

Rachel shared that sexual assault was only occasionally spoken about in her Catholic community, but that when it was, it was differentiated from sexual sin.

> I feel like most people didn't talk about it, to be honest. Like, maybe, like, maybe they would mention it and be like, obviously, like, if you are a victim of, like, sexual abuse or assault, then that's not like a sin. That's not you doing something that you're like, you know, that's against, that's against your will, so it can't be a sin and stuff like that. But, like, very, I feel like they mentioned it very rarely, um, so that's, that's an interesting, I never thought about that.

Exposure to Victim-Blaming Narratives

Participants described victim-blaming narratives that they learned from friends, family, school, and church. Not only do these narratives leave women vulnerable to experiencing sexual assault, a study examining survivors’ experiences in Evangelical settings also found that women struggled to identify abuse in “a gender-traditional religious upbringing focused on submission

and obedience" (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). Prior research has identified that religious individuals are more likely to accept ideas of benevolent sexism and traditional gender roles, concepts that have been linked to higher belief in rape myths (Navarro & and Tewksbury, 2018). This corresponds to the participants' experiences of learning victim-blaming narratives from Christian people or institutions in their lives. These narratives include men not being able to control their sexual urges, women being assigned responsibility for men's behaviour, women needing to submit to men, and women being disbelieved when disclosing sexual assault.

Men Cannot Control Themselves. Some participants learned the narrative that men cannot control their sexual urges. Mary shared how her mother spoke to her about a "point of no return" when she explained sex, implying that men could not control their actions when it came to sexuality. She shares:

> She also, like, she explained how there's kind of a line when you're making out and kissing and touching, this kind of a point of no return….I think there was an implication that the man would be out of control after a certain point, like that, you couldn't, you couldn't go to a certain point and then expect a man to be able to stop, right? So, you had to, you had to stop before you were getting to a place where you couldn't stop.

Morgan shared that within her Catholic school, men were seen as needing sex as part of their biology (more than women). She stated, "That's what was told to us, a lot, like, men have needs. Men like, have to do this. Men have to, like, it's just, it's just who they are. Men are just, like, wired that way." Something that furthered this idea was teachers speaking about how a girl "shouldn't be alone with a boy," implying that it would be unsafe since he would not be able to control himself.

Women Are Responsible for Men's Behaviour. Because of the narrative that men need sex and cannot control their urges, participants were told that they had responsibility for controlling men's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and therefore needed to dress and act modestly. Rachel spoke about how she received conflicting messages about modesty throughout her Catholic upbringing. On one hand, Catholic speakers encouraged young women to dress and act modestly to show their identity and worth as "daughters of God" by presenting themselves as whole people instead of distracting from who they were by immodest clothing, which Rachel considers a positive message about modesty. On the other hand, Rachel described how other speakers told her to dress modestly in order not to "tempt other people." She describes her memory of this idea:

> If you don't want people to look at you a certain way, then you have to like, act and look a certain way if that makes sense. Like, if you don't want people to be like, lustful, then you have to act and look in a way that doesn't make them, you know, feel lust, I guess.

Rachel now sees this type of message as harmful and a poorly presented, inaccurate interpretation of Christian modesty.

Ivy expressed that she also learned to dress and behave modestly to protect men from impure thoughts, but also to ensure that she did not "cause" her "brothers to stumble." She shares, "I was also taught that women should be modest in dress and in like spirit and the way that they behave." She shares how after she was sexually assaulted by her youth pastor, she felt the need to dress modestly to protect herself from him, which was slightly different than her motivation for dressing modestly to protect boys her age from sinning. She shares:

> I mean, at that time, like, we are also taught in the church, like dress modestly, so that you don't, you don't cause your brothers to stumble. So, I do say, like, in that particular

> case, yeah, I was protecting myself because I didn't want to feel gross, and I didn't - I don't think I thought it was okay for a 33-year-old man [her youth pastor] to look at a younger woman. I think when, when I thought about protecting my brothers from stumbling, I thought more about people my age, but then when it came to him, it was more about protecting myself than protecting other men from stumbling.

Internalized Gendered Powerlessness

Participants described how gendered expectations they internalized placed them in a position more vulnerable to be sexually assaulted or not disclose what happened to others after a sexual assault. Participants also reported experiences of feeling like they did not have any control as part of their expected role as women. Some participants felt powerless through gendered expectations that women are passive and gentle, needing to follow men as the leaders in relationships, which left participants vulnerable to sexual assault by placing them in a role where they could not say no to or react against an offender. Research has found that both sexual assertiveness and using resistance and self-defence are protective against sexual assault (Ullman & Najdowski, 2011), and conversely in this study the internalized powerlessness from these gendered expectations placed participants in a more vulnerable position since resistance or self-defence were contrary to the passive female role ascribed to them.

Several participants spoke about how as women they believed that they should be passive and gentle, not assertive or disruptive. Morgan described:

> Like, you're taught, to like, live in this patriarchy, or this, like, patriarchal religion, in a way, and you're trying to, like, navigate how to fit in, and, like, where you fit into that, and make sure that, like, you don't cause disruption, because that would be, like, the worst thing ever.

Ivy thoughtfully shared that she may have understood these Christian teachings about gender incorrectly, but that how she interpreted gender expectations at the time was that women were meant to be passive, especially in response to men. She shares:

> I think like, it's possible that I understood it differently than what like, maybe, like a wise woman would kind of explain it as, but from my understanding, a woman was supposed to be, like, quiet and maybe more submissive, and not really, I don't know, like speak back to other people, and particularly, like men.

Rachel also understood her teachings about gender from the Catholic Church to mean that women were not to be assertive, despite her mother, a practicing Catholic, being an assertive woman. She shares:

> Yeah, definitely the teachings of the Church have influenced, I think, how I perceive myself, like I think, um, even though, you know, my mom is like, quite, you know, assertive and stuff like that, I've always been worried about being the same thing, which doesn't, I don't know if that makes sense, but I've always, yeah, felt like, oh, that I'm not supposed to be like that.

While Rachel was unsure whether this came from their friendship or Christianity, she also described believing that it was her male friend's role to protect her, which left her in a vulnerable position when he took advantage of this and assaulted her. She shares, "I guess there was, like, that idea of, like, well, like, you know, he should have, he should have wanted to, like, take care of me and protect me, or, or whatnot, like, and that's not what happened."

Mary explained how the Christian gender roles she learned involved the man taking the lead in romantic relationships when it came to sexual activity. She shares:

> I was to be passive and responsive and receptive, and the man was to take initiative and leadership and think ahead. So for me, the gender roles meant that I was to be submissive, receptive, passive, joyful, creative, nurturing, sweet, kind, agreeable. And for him, he was to be considerate, benevolent, protective, have integrity and, and part of that would have been that planning and leadership and thinking ahead to ramifications or implications, and definitely it would have been his duty to ask, and my duty to consent or not consent.

When her boyfriend raped her, this understanding of her role as a woman in the relationship left her in a powerless position since she felt like she could not say anything in the moment or afterwards. She describes how she believed that if she asked him to stop in the moment or later asked what he had done meant to him that this would have been unfeminine and unattractive. She shares:

> Yeah, right, because I would have had, it would have required a role reversal, and then that would have driven him away in my worldview, right? If I had acted like a man, then that would push him away. I had to act like a woman, and then he would be attracted to me, and then he would take, you know, the, the consideration and rise to that challenge and responsibility.

This Christian idea that she needed to step back and allow a man to "rise to that challenge and responsibility" in her relationship failed to address the vulnerability this creates when a man abuses that power.

Morgan described how teenage boys at her school used the Catholic teaching that women were to submit to men to coerce girls to have sex with them.

> And even, like, a lot of the like, the boys that we were around, they would almost, like, weaponize the, like, religious aspect. Like, they would be like, "Oh, well, you know, like, if you want to, like, be like a good girl, like, like, you like, do what I say."….If like, they wanted to, like, have sex with you or something, they would say, like, "Oh, well, like, it's your job to please me. And like, you don't want to, like, cause a scene, do you? Like, you know you're, you're supposed to, like, do this to please me."

Katherine shared how the teaching about Christian male authority left her vulnerable to sexual assault. She describes how if a man wanted something sexual from her, she felt like as a woman she could not say no. Even though this submission was only supposed to be towards men, because she was used to living with a lack of autonomy she also felt like she could not say no to sexual requests from a woman either. She states:

> There's just a belief that, well, man is in control. Like, okay, I am supposed to not say no, not say no to the man, and then, what does that leave you with other women? I don't know, but I, it just compounds the feeling. So, yeah, you can't say no….

Summary of Theme 1

This theme explored the ways that Christian beliefs about sex and gender that the participants learned increased their vulnerability to sexual assault. The first subtheme described how participants shared that they received a lack of sexual education that left them vulnerable to sexual assault through a lack of knowledge of sex itself, of female pleasure, and of sexual assault and consent. The next subtheme explored the victim-blaming narratives that participants heard, which included that men cannot control themselves and that women were responsible for men's behaviour. Finally, the last subtheme looked at ways the participants had internalized a gendered powerlessness which left them in a position where they could not dissent, particularly to men.

Theme 2: Perceptions

This theme explores various ways that participants perceived their experience of sexual assault. The first two subthemes each represent a way that participants conceptualized the sexual assault. The dual sense of offender accountability and self-blame explores the duality of how participants simultaneously felt at fault for the assault while also considering the offender's actions to be wrong. The next theme of normalization examines how participants saw the assault as normal sexual activity due to various factors that had left them vulnerable to abuse. It is important to note that four participants were sexually assaulted more than one time, and two of them fall into both subthemes for their appraisals of different events in their lives. The last subtheme explores the process of how participants who did not see the offender as accountable for their actions or who normalized the experience changed their perception of the event to see it as a sexual assault.

Dual Sense of Offender Accountability and Self-Blame

Four of the participants in the study expressed complex perceptions of their experiences, ones that contained both a sense that the offender was responsible for their own actions and that they themselves were also in some way responsible for the offender's actions. Three of the participants' responses in the current study related their self-blame to Christian precepts around gender and sexuality, which is in line with findings that beliefs around modesty shift responsibility for male sexual feelings and behaviour onto women (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). While qualitative research with female survivors has found that Christian expectations for women around sexuality can contribute to self-blame (McKinzie & Richards, 2022), it is important to note that Christian teaching on sexuality helped Ivy recognize that the offender's actions were wrong even as they contributed to a sense of self-blame.

Katherine shared how, after she had been sexually abused as a child, she was sexually assaulted in foster care a number of times as a teenager. During that time, she did see what happened to her as "wrong." She describes how she knew that it was something being done to her because she did not have a choice in the situation. She states:

> What did I think? Well, I think because I had already been...like I saw somewhat as wrong, but I didn't have any choice….So I didn't really think anything other than yeah, it's wrong, but it's just another person that, I believed that most people were abusers anyway, still, like I knew it wasn't everyone, but, everyone in my circles.

Despite this, Katherine describes how she felt like it was her fault when she looked back on the sexual abuse she endured as a child and adolescent. For her, if she chose sexual activity, it would have been a sin. Deciphering whether what she defined as sexual sin was her choice or someone else's fault was a heavy process, since if it were her own choice she would have therefore lessened her sexual purity as a Chrisitan. She states:

> You know that sexuality is such a hot topic and you're not sure how to unravel the difference between your fault, their fault, because it all seems to be wrapped in your fault anyways, like you chose it somehow, even as a kid, or it was your fault, like you could have done something as a kid. And so there's these fine like unsaid rules and unsaid things and thoughts that come into your mind that are never taught necessarily, but that are takeaways from someone who's been abused, because the nature is you often blame yourself.

Rachel talks about how there was also nuance for her in terms of self-blame and offender accountability. When she was sexually assaulted by a friend at a party in high school, she did not necessarily think she was responsible for his actions, but she did blame herself for getting drunk

and wearing clothes she considered to be immodest, both of which were against both her own principles and Catholic teachings. When asked about how Christian teachings impacted her experience, she stated:

> I think that's really where, like, I think that definitely played into it for the first one, especially, like, I was, you know, drinking very heavily. And like, you know, it was a party. There was, like, you know, I was probably wearing an outfit that would not be considered modest, and stuff like that…..I think that definitely played into it being like, okay, well, you know, this is what happens when you like, drink excessively, or when you go to parties like this, or when you dress a certain way, I definitely think that my brain made that connection.

Rachel described of the second time she was sexually assaulted, "I could reasonably tell myself like, I didn't put myself in a situation like, you know what I mean, like that, that really had nothing to do with me." However, the offender went to a church that Rachel and her family often attended, which caused Rachel to doubt her own experience. She shares, "My brain's kind of like, 'Wait. He's like, you know, he's here with his family. Like, maybe, maybe I was wrong. Maybe he's not like, a, like, a weird guy.'" There was also a part of her that did blame herself for not dressing modestly, thinking that contributed to him assaulting her. She states:

> I did think, like, oh, like, maybe if, like, I had worn something different, like, I think I had, like, leggings on or something, I was like, well, if I had worn something different, then maybe he wouldn't have done that type thing….Yeah, like, even to this day I remember my outfit. So, that's definitely like, a connection that my brain made.

Morgan shared another mixed perception of a sexual assault she experienced at a bar as a young adult where a man grabbed her inappropriately to the point where she felt pain. She

describes how having discussed her previous experience of sexual assault in therapy helped her recognize the offender's responsibility, but that despite this a small part of her did feel self-blame. She states:

> If I hadn't have been drinking, maybe I would have been more, like, aware and he wouldn't have done that. But then, because I'd been in therapy for a bit, I had, I was kind of like, "No, it was, it was him, it was, it was his fault," you know, but it's still, there's still that, like, little quiet voice that would say, like, "oh, well, this was your fault."

She also told a group of friends shortly after it happened, who validated her experience and told her that she was not responsible for the offender's actions. She states:

> I was thankful in that situation too, like, I did have my friends, like, my like, group of like friends that were girls that were very like, "yeah, that was not okay. Like, that was not your fault. That was his fault."

The aspect of self-blame was even more present when Morgan was raped by a friend as a high school student. At the time, she blamed herself for spending time alone with a boy, since she had been taught at her Catholic high school that this was something dangerous for a girl to do. She thought that because she made that choice to go to his house, she was responsible for his actions. She states, "And then even, yeah, like, guilty of like, yeah, thinking about those teachings of like, yeah, well, don't hang out with boys alone then, like, because that's what happens. So you, like, did this to yourself."

Ivy describes how both times she was sexually assaulted there were parts of her that blamed herself for what happened, despite knowing the offender's actions were wrong. In high school when a boy touched her breasts in a "joking" way, she wondered afterwards if previous actions had led to him thinking he could do that. Specifically, she wondered if she had not

behaved in a way that was pure by Christian standards since she liked to use raunchy humour. She shares that she wondered if she, "should be so pure and not make any jokes or not, not do anything that would insinuate that I'm the type of person that you can do that to." Additionally, she compared herself to Christian girls and women in her church and thought, because they behaved in a way considered to be purer, this would not happen to them. She states:

> I do feel like, like, if I thought about the people who I admired growing up, I'd be like, this would never happen to them. This would never happen to 'blank' person who I grew up, grew up with in church. She would never, no, no boy would ever think it's okay to do that to her.

Ivy describes how in one instance of assault, this one by her youth pastor, she immediately knew that the behaviour of the offender was wrong. She says, "I felt quite deeply that it was wrong and there was nothing that I had done, like, it wasn't – I didn't think I was bad because of it. I knew he had done something wrong." Ivy describes how part of the reason she knew it was wrong was because of Christian teachings on sexual purity. Particularly because her youth pastor was married, she identified his behaviour as impure, an intentional action that was outside of Christian sexual morality and something that might have reflected deeper issues within him. She describes:

> I was probably like, "What the do you think you're doing? Like you're married!" I probably, like it was more about him and his sexual purity than anything, like it, maybe it was almost like a positive in that case, like, keep yourself pure, buddy. Why are you like – the steps that it takes to slap someone's butt are, it's not just like a, "neat!" Like, you see a 12-year-old butt and you thought, "let me slap this pretty hard"?

Despite this knowledge, she wondered if the way she dressed or behaved had brought on his behaviour. This examination was to see if she was responsible for what happened so she could protect herself in the future. She questions if she and the other girls at the retreat should stop slapping each other's butts, "Because that makes a grown man think he's allowed to do that?" She had learned from Christian speakers that women should dress modestly to avoid tempting men to sin, but in this case, she felt like she wanted to become more modest to protect herself from him.

> Being like, well, you know, I need to maybe be more careful around this guy, like, with what I wear, with what I, how I dress, how I behave, like, maybe in that way, because that, that had been going on for my whole life, is like, be careful about having your boobs showing or your butt, you know. And I think I had already, already by that time, been like, yeah, grown men might look at you, so just be careful. And now I was like, well, this grown man might look at you, so just be careful.

Normalization

Three of the participants once viewed their experience of sexual assault as normal sexual activity. Several factors lead to this, including the age when abuse was experienced, a lack of knowledge around consent and sexual assault, and the identity of the offender. This corresponds to qualitative research by McKinzie and Richards which found that survivors who grew up in specifically Evangelical Christian settings lacked understanding of sexual assault and language to describe what happened to them (McKinzie & Richards, 2022).

Katherine's experience of sexual abuse started when she was too young to remember. Because of this, she thought it was normal, which lead to hopelessness for life and self-harm. She describes:

> Well, for many years, I thought it was normal, and so I lost all hope for life. I was suicidal since my, like, my first suicide attempt, I was six years old. I started hurting myself, I was around two and a half, physically hurting myself.

Morgan's perception of being raped was influenced by her internalized sexual and gender expectations for women, a lack of education on sexual assault and consent, and the identity of the offender. Morgan shared that the lack of education about consent and sexual assault meant that she lacked the language to conceptualize her experience. She states:

> So like, I didn't even know what happened to me was sexual assault, because I didn't like, I wasn't taught that language. I wasn't taught consent. I was kind of taught that narrative of, like, oh well, this is just what's expected of you.

She also described how her understanding of the Catholic sex education she received (emphasizing the importance of female submissiveness and prioritizing male pleasure) contributed to her seeing rape as a normal sexual experience. She shares:

> But then also, there was the part of me where I was just like, okay, well, maybe that's like, just what sex is. Like, you're not always going to enjoy it. It's like, you know, it's like, that is what it is, like, you're not always going to have a great time, but that's just, that's just sex. And then so for a long time, that's what, yeah, that's what I just thought, like, sex was, I thought that's, it was something that was done to you, not with you, like you're not an active participant. You just kind of, again, do what you're told so that the person that you're with can enjoy themselves.

Morgan's impression of sexual assault as a concept was that it meant a stranger instigating a violent act. She describes, "My idea of like, rape and sexual assault at that time was like, you're walking down the street and like, a scary man that you don't know, like, takes you

into an alley and, like, does whatever he wants." Because the offender was a friend, she did not categorize it as something that could be assault. Furthermore, soon after the assault occurred, she heard him speaking about what happened which made her even question herself for not enjoying intimacy with him. She states:

> But then I remember seeing him, like, a couple days later at school, and he was like, bragging to his friends about how, like, great it was. And then I remember thinking, like, okay, then maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought it was, like, I was like, oh, well, like, maybe I was just having an off day. And like, feeling like, not, not, not good that day.

Like Morgan, Mary had a similar understanding of sexual assault which contributed to perceiving being raped by her partner at the time as normal sexual intimacy. She explains how her desire to eventually be sexually intimate with him as her boyfriend and potential future husband made the possibility that what happened was rape not even on the table.

> It was around perceptions and definitions of sexual assault and rape, I was like, oh my gosh. I had not thought of it that way, because he was my boyfriend, and because I had been excited to have a sexual relationship with him, and willing to have a sexual relationship with him if it meant we were getting married and having family and having kids and building a life together.

Re-Framing

Four of the participants spoke about their process of moving from normalization or self-blame (or both for some participants who experienced multiple sexual assaults), to perceiving what happened as sexual assault and holding the offender accountable for their actions.

Katherine experienced a shift in her perspective away from normalization to seeing events in her life as abusive when she noticed that other students at school did not have the same experiences as she did. She states:

> It really peaked when I was around 10 years old, and there was a conversation amongst some students, and I realized it wasn't something that people went through, some did, though, and then I was like, oh, people don't have to live like this.

In her first experience of sexual assault, Rachel was assaulted by a friend at a party when she was drunk and vomiting in the bathroom and he was "taking care of her" and at first blamed herself for what had happened. She explains what changed her perspective:

> And then, like, people who talk about this whole situation have always been like, "yeah, he was taking care of me [Rachel] the whole night. Like, what a nice guy." Blah, blah, blah. And like, I think the more that I heard that, the more I'm like, I think that's like, where it started settling in, like, no, he was taking care of me because he was like, or maybe not because, but like, he was trying - he knew I was drunk, and he wanted to take advantage of me to some extent, because he wouldn't have done that otherwise. Like, yeah, so then I guess the answer is, like, not at first, but like over time, like it did solidify in my head.

While her friends' comments about the offender were not accurate, they did help Rachel see how he had intentionally manipulated the situation to put her in a vulnerable position. While she shares that she did continue to experience self-blame at times, this realization validated that what had happened was wrong and that his actions were intentional.

For Morgan, the re-framing process began through a conversation with a friend. At the time, Morgan viewed her experience of rape by her male friend as normal sexual activity.

However, another friend shared that she had been through something similar with this same male friend, and because of their shared negative experiences they began to research what could have happened online, which led them to articles about sexual assault. She describes:

> And then I vividly remember us, like in the cafeteria, like Googling, like, this is how I'm feeling, like, what is happening? And all these articles about, like, sexual assault, sexual assault support, but like, if, if you or someone you know. And then I was like, reading that, and remember being like, there's no way, like, that's not sexual assault. Like, I was like, sexual assault is from a stranger that you don't know when you're drunk, that you had taken advantage of, like, a random, scary man. And then the more I just like, kept reading about, like, the definition of sexual assault and what it was, I remember having this like, realization of being like, "Okay, so that's what happened, like, that's why I felt this way." That's why I felt that something was not right. It wasn't just I was having an off day. It's like, it's like my body knew before my brain did type thing.

Learning that sexual assault most often happens with someone known was a key factor for Morgan to realize that what happened to her was rape; it helped her to understand why what she had seen as a normal sexual experience caused such a negative physical and emotional response in her.

Mary also had perceived rape as normal sexual activity. Like Morgan, learning about the definition of sexual assault and consent, which for her came from participating in an academic research survey that discussed those topics, was part of what shifted her perspective. The other cause for her shift in perspective was seeing a similar scenario to hers play out on a television show. She describes:

> In the beginning of Downton Abbey, it's part of - one of the premises of the whole story arc is that there's this visiting young Turkish ambassador's son or something at the Abbey, and he finds his way into the eldest daughter's room, and he forces himself on her, and they make it you know, it's very clearly sexual assault….but he is her crush. She does have a crush on him, and he does insist, and he does sexually assault her….And then she does take responsibility for it later, and views it as her being, having, you know, done this, this thing, like she was, she was outside the bounds. She had been spoiled in some way, and she had this, you know, this secret to keep. And so it was that story that made me think back and go, wait a minute, I see some parallels. I see, you know, I didn't consent, and I didn't have an opportunity to consent, and if I had been asked….I would have not consented.

The key connection for her was realizing that having a romantic or sexual interest in someone, as she and this character had, did not equate to consent, or withdraw the possibility that rape could occur.

Summary of Theme 2

The subthemes in Theme 2 provide insight into some of the many perceptions that individuals can have about their own experience of sexual assault. The dual experience of self-blame and offender accountability experienced by four of the participants demonstrates the complexity of assigning blame for sexual assault, particularly for women navigating Christian beliefs around female sexual agency. Three participants normalized sexual assault as typical sexual experiences, for reasons including a lack of knowledge around sexual assault and consent and belief that female submission and lack of desire were normal parts of sex. The last subtheme explores the experience of reframing from self-blame or normalization to seeing the reality of

sexual assault, perhaps most significantly being made aware of definitions of rape and sexual assault.

Theme 3: Impacts

This theme examines the impacts that participants experienced from sexual assault in the way they perceived their worth, in their emotions, and in their spirituality. For many participants, their perception of the assault discussed in Theme 2 predicted the type of impact they experienced. Some participants expressed shifts in their worth based on Christian teachings on sexual purity, while one participant found her relationship with God bolstered her self-worth after experiencing assault. Participants shared a number of different emotions they experienced, some of which were normal for survivors of sexual assault regardless of exposure to Christian teachings on gender and sexuality, and some feelings which participants tied to experiencing the sexual assault with Christian beliefs. Finally, this theme addresses the impact that sexual assault had on the participants' spirituality.

Worth

Four participants expressed how experiencing sexual assault changed their perception of their own value, varying depending on how they perceived the assault as discussed in Theme 2. Some felt that they had lost some inherent worth, while others felt that they would be worth less in the eyes of others, particularly men. For one participant, her image of God was a protective factor, positively validating her worth. For other participants, Chrisitan beliefs around virginity and purity caused lower perceptions of self-worth. Experiencing worthlessness related to purity after sexual assault was also found in Whiteley's (2019) study with survivors from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Mary described how she felt badly about herself because she had “crossed this threshold” into having sex with her boyfriend, since she initially did not realize what had happened was not consensual. Although she believed it was wrong to have pre-marital sex, to her it seemed more acceptable if it was a relationship that was going to end in marriage. When her relationship ended, she began to feel “really, really bad,” describing, “and I was all by myself. I didn't know how to cope with it, and in hindsight, I was feeling badly about myself.”

Rachel also experienced a shift in how she viewed herself. She noticed that she later felt apprehensive about disclosing to her Catholic boyfriend that a friend had sexually assaulted her at a party when she was drunk, worrying that it would reflect poorly on her. After discussing this worry, she added, “So I guess like that somewhere within me, I guess, I must still think that it somehow reflects badly on me, which doesn't make any sense really, but yeah.” In this statement, Rachel expresses the conflict inside of her about one part of her that believes she is worth less (particularly because of dressing immodestly and drinking alcohol, two things that were outside her own values and her Catholic beliefs) and another part of her that consciously sees her value as unaffected by her behaviours or the sexual assault.

Katherine described how she had no self-worth as a child since she had been abused from her earliest memories. She states, “And so, like, I just had this belief of I'm worthless, like completely worthless, and all I'm good for is being used by other people.” In addition to feeling worthless as a result of the sexual abuse, she also felt that it affected her worth as a Christian because she was no longer pure. She states:

> I always felt too having been abused that because you're supposed to, you know, have this purity, I didn't feel pure because of my past. I didn't feel pure because of my own actions, never mind the things that I had been through.

She struggled to make sense of which times in her life she had chosen to be sexually active and which times she had been assaulted. Despite the latter not being her choice, she felt that both impacted her purity as a Christian.

This impact on her purity also affected her perceived worth to men in her Christian community. She describes how negotiating what was her choice or not did not matter when it came to her purity since she was still no longer a virgin, which made her see herself as less valuable as a potential spouse in a Christian marriage. This belief added to the worthlessness she already felt. She states:

> I thought I was tainted. I thought I was too dirty. I thought I was damaged goods. I thought I would never be good enough for a man who's seeking a woman who's pure….And it's, it's, it's hard to - there's, there's a line of knowing what's a virgin by choice and a virgin not by choice, you know?....Your virginity was broken because you were abused or you chose to have sex. Those are two very different lines, but they still end up the same, right?....In terms of the actual I mean, if you're going to get down to it, hymen broken, okay, no longer virgin, right? And so that's really tricky. And I just saw myself as totally dirty and damaged goods to begin with. And so it was hard to wrap my mind around that one, until I found a man that didn't care. But it might have been really difficult if I didn't.

However, her view of herself as impure did not impact the way she thought God saw her. For her, God saw her as pure and whole, which was a protective factor but not enough to heal the low sense of worth developed from the abuse and the way she viewed her own purity. She describes, “God saw me as pure, and I could understand that based on, you know, Jesus and what

he did on the cross for us, but my own thoughts, knowing what I had been through, I just couldn't shake that."

Like Katherine, Morgan also experienced a sense of lack of worth to men because of loss of purity. Because she initially perceived being raped by a friend as having had sex, she thought her value to men had gone down because she was no longer a virgin. She had been told that in order to find a husband she needed to keep her purity intact, and her understanding was that, "if you don't do that, well, then good luck finding a husband, because men want virgins, and men like virgins." After being raped, she feared she would not be wanted by a man. She shared, "I'm not gonna find, like, a good partner, because they're gonna know these things about me that I've done, like, outside of marriage." These last words reflect the self-blame she held and how it influenced the way she felt about her self worth.

Beyond the perception of being worth less to men, Morgan also experienced a sense of diminished worth within herself related to her values. Because Morgan had been taught about virginity as being something sacred, she felt that she was not a good person and was no longer worth what she had been before having sex ("having sex" as she perceived being raped by one of the men at the time). She states:

> I tied a lot of like, like, my sexual things to my like, inherent worth as a human like, I was like, very like, oh, this is like, I'm not a good person, because I've done this twice now with these two different men, and I'm like, easy. I like, get around. Like, my like worth is not like, I'm not - it was, excuse me, it was tied a lot to my like morals. Like I was like, oh, I must not be like, a good, a good person, then if I'm like, doing this.

Emotional

The impacts felt on the participant's worth, as well as their perceptions of the sexual assault discussed in Theme 2, both elicited emotions for the participants. These include confusion, feeling violated, feeling disgust, anger, fear, guilt, and shame. Some of these are emotions that relate to the experience itself, while others are feelings that arise from participants' understanding of Christian teachings on sex and gender.

Confusion. Two of the participants expressed feelings of confusion after being sexually assaulted. Mary shared that when she was raped by her boyfriend, her immediate perception of what happened was to normalize it, which left her unprepared to grapple with what having sex meant for herself, her relationship, and her reputation in the eyes of others. She states:

> And I lay there going, oh my gosh, we just had sex. And that was my concept at the time I was we just had sex, and then I was absorbing the implications for me and for him. What did this mean? What was going on? What did this mean that you know, for us as boyfriend and girlfriend, what did this mean going forward? What did this mean for me, and like with my parents know? Would they, would they just know this had happened?

Rachel also experienced confusion after being sexually assaulted by a friend who had been helping her when she was sick at a party. She shares how she struggled to reconcile his role as a friend in her life to his abusive actions. She states:

> I was just like, very confused. I was like, it's a person that I like, I never thought I had to worry about that, especially, like, you know, yeah, like, when he was supposedly taking care of me and being such a nice person. And then, yeah, I was very confused.

Violation. Morgan describes how after she was raped by a friend, she felt violated. While she did not have the language to describe what happened to her as sexual assault, she felt a loss of control over her own body. She states:

> I remember feeling like, afterwards, even, like, uncomfortable with, like, my own body, like my own, like nakedness, like, I remember feeling very like, I don't want to, like, look in the mirror at, like my naked...like I need to, like, wear, like, put my clothes on, like I don't want to like, I just felt, yeah, like my body wasn't my own, and someone had done what they wanted to me.

Later in the interview, she added, "looking back on it now, or like, in more like present day as an adult, like, the language that I have now to describe it is, yeah, I just felt very taken advantage of, and like, yeah, completely violated."

Ivy shared two experiences where she felt violated. The first experience was as a child, and Ivy reflected during the interview that she is unsure if she considers it sexual assault because it was by another child, but, because of how she felt about that experience, she decided to speak about it. As a child, she was touched sexually by another child her age publicly at a soccer game. She sates, "I remember feeling extremely like violated…and the situation that it happened in I was like, why isn't someone helping me? Like, it was in front of people." Another experience of feeling violated, this time around something she certainly considers sexual assault, was by her youth pastor as a teenager. In this case, feeling violated helped her reinforce that what happened was not her fault. She shares:

> I think I was quite fortunate in that my first reaction to, particularly like the last two instances that I mentioned, was anger and a feeling that I had been violated and been like, touched wrongly and like that I didn't, I feel like that in itself, was like, you know, I didn't revert like right to shame.

Disgust. Three participants experienced feelings of disgust, either towards the offender, the situation, or themselves. Feelings of disgust towards oneself have been described as a subset

of mental contamination, as "feelings of dirtiness in response to thoughts, images, or memories," and are "frequently reported after sexual trauma" (Jones et al., 2023, p. 932). Jones et al. (2023) found that experiencing mental contamination after sexual trauma was significantly and positively correlated with scrupulosity. This is significant for the current study since our participants raised in Christian environments experienced mental contamination following sexual assault.

Ivy described the disgust she felt when her youth pastor touched her, which was mainly directed towards him. She states, "It made me feel gross that like a grown man….like that instance, specifically, I was like, ew like, why did you do that?....I think I felt very starkly that this was like, ew, you're gross. This is wrong." Like feeling violated, feeling disgust helped her identify the offender's actions as wrong.

Like Ivy, Rachel used the same word "gross" to describe her experience. However, experiencing disgust did not help Rachel identify what happened to her was sexual assault when her friend touched her when she was drunk. She shares, "I definitely like, like, I knew that it was like, I was like, that was gross. I, like, felt, I definitely felt super icky. But I kept, like, telling myself, like, oh, it's not that big of a deal."

Morgan described how both when she was raped by a friend and when she was sexually assaulted at a bar, she felt unclean, and like Ivy and Rachel, used the word "gross" to describe the feeling. She shares, "And then similar thing I remember afterwards, I like, got home and I was like, I need to, like, like, take a shower and like, I feel so like, dirty and gross and like, whatever."

Anger. Moss notes that the emotional response of anger to rape has been under-researched (2009). Only one of the participants had an immediate reaction of anger after being

sexually assaulted. Ivy responded with anger to being touched by a friend as a teenager and how her response elicited an apology from the offender. She states:

> I reacted very angrily….And I didn't used to swear, believe it or not [laughs], and I like, swore at him. I was like, "Don't you effing touch me. You don't have the right to touch me." I reacted really, really angrily at him, and, like, defended myself, and he, he actually, like, apologized.

She also reflected on why she reacted with anger and acknowledged that the response was both due to seeing his behaviour as violating but also because it brought up questions about her own purity as a Christian. She states:

> I think, like, part of the reason that I reacted with anger was, firstly because I was being, like, unjustly touched in a way that I didn't want to be, but also, like, listen, I've gotta fucking protect myself here, buddy. Like, don't touch me. Like, this is not yours. You haven't earned this body. Like, do you know what I mean? Like, it was almost like a, I think part of it was like, now, now I've gotta think about this. Now I've gotta parse through this. Is there something I did? Is there something I need to do? Like, is this something that God could be like, do you know what I like….I feel like part of that anger was like, now look what you've done. Like, I've gotta deal with this now.

When her youth pastor sexually assaulted her, Ivy also felt angry. She shared that she sees her response of anger as protective, saying, “I do think it was, like, kind of protective that I was, like, so angry, and I knew right away, like this, you're gross, not me.”

Fear. A posttrauma appraisal of fear towards the world is common after sexual assault (Rosenthal et al., 2024). Rachel shares how her perception of the world changed from a safe place to somewhere no one could be trusted, eliciting fear. She states:

> I definitely had, like, some feelings of like, oh well like, if this person knows me so well and is like, supposedly, supposed to, like, take care of me and things like that, and even he would do something like that, then, like, you know, I'm not safe anywhere.

Abused at a young age by many individuals including family members, Katherine grew up in a state of fear about others and the world. She shares:

> So I was afraid of everything, pretty much, afraid of people, afraid of the dark, afraid of, I just became afraid of everything. I can't even describe the fear because it's so dark. Fear is so dark. It's so encompassing growing up because you can't trust anyone, you can't trust, and you know that anyone who's supposed to love you is not loving you, and so there's nowhere to go. It's just terror.

Guilt. One participant experienced guilt when she normalized her experiences. This is in line with the two qualitative studies with Christian female survivors that found that self-blame and subsequent guilt for perceived sexual sin were common among participants (Whiteley, 2019). A phenomena unaddressed by the current qualitative literature (Whiteley, 2019; McKinzie & Richards, 2022), however, was the experience of one of the participants in the present study who felt guilty for her emotional response because of how it did not match the expectations for Christian women. Ivy describes how she felt guilt because she responded to being sexually assaulted in a way she believed to be unchristian. She shared that she felt guilt for feeling angry when a male friend touched her breasts without consent as a teenager. She saw how she responded with anger as unkind and harsh, intolerant of a boy simply “having fun.” She states:

> I still felt guilty that I had reacted so angrily at him, like, I shouldn't - I should have been gentle and nice and like, or just laughed it off….I would suspect it had to do

> with the gender roles because, “oh, like, he's just a boy. He's just trying to be funny. He's just trying to have fun, and like, you didn't need to get so angry. You could just...” I do think like growing up being told, like the way that you get things is being gentle and sweet, you know, I think it was related to the gender roles, but it's hard to say for sure.

Mary experienced feelings of guilt around being sexually assaulted because she perceived it as having had sex, something outside of Christian morality since she was not married. Because of this, she felt that she could not tell her parents what had happened and remembers the guilt she felt over keeping something from them. She shares:

> I felt really guilty and really bad, and really also kind of amazed, because I thought it was written all over me and, and I was really surprised that, you know, my parents couldn't tell that anything had changed. Because for me, everything had changed internally.

Morgan was raped after she had already had sex with one person, which left her feeling guilty, since in her mind at the time she had perceived the rape as sex. This meant she had not only had sex with another person, but this one was outside the context of a relationship, which increased her feelings of guilt since it was further from the Catholic teaching of only having within a marriage. She shares:

> Yeah, I think, like, guilt for like, like, having sex with like, another person. Like, I was like, I was like, "Okay, I had sex with my boyfriend a couple of years ago, but this is, like, someone that's not even my boyfriend. Like, I can't believe I did that."….And so, yeah, just the guilt around, like, oh, like, I have, like, I have had sex with two people now, like, that's so, like, that's, like, that's not okay.

Morgan explains how she felt dirty and unclean because she viewed what happened to her as her having sinned. She described how she felt intense guilt and so confessed her "sin" at her Catholic school's yearly opportunity for confession.

> So I was like, I feel like dirty and like unclean, and like I need to, like, yeah like wash this off, and, like, ask for forgiveness, pretty much…. I remember, like, telling the priest, like, during confession, being like, I had sex, like, and I feel so guilty about it, and then I just remember him, like, being like, "Yeah, well, you need to, like, say this many prayers and like, like, abstain until you find your husband, and then, like, God will forgive you, blah, blah, blah." So I remember being like, okay, this is what I gotta do. Like, this is what I, this is what I must do then, because I, like, made a bad mistake.

Her description of the priest's words as "blah, blah, blah" suggests that he inadequately addressed her interior struggle.

Shame. Two of the participants expressed feeling shame, which can be defined as, "An intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (Brown, 2006, p. 45). A study found that there is a correlation between shame and self-blame after sexual assault (Vidal & Petrak, 2007), a finding that is seen in both participants who expressed both shame and self-blame.

Mary began to experience shame when her relationship with her boyfriend ended. She conceptualized when he raped her as them having had sex, which she accepted outside of marriage because she saw sex as linked to commitment and that having sex together meant their relationship was moving towards marriage. When she moved away for university and their relationship ended, she had to grapple with having had sex with a man who would not be her husband, something which elicited shame within her Christian worldview. She shares:

> So I was back at university, then soon after, and I went for like, the free counseling, because I was starting to experience like depression, and I was feeling, you know, as the reality was setting in that this relationship wasn't the way I wanted the relationship to be, then I was just starting to feel really, really bad because I had crossed this threshold, and I was all by myself. I didn't know how to cope with it, and in hindsight, I was feeling badly about myself.

Morgan shared how her Catholic sexual education had emphasized the importance of virginity as both something inherently sacred and something appealing to men. After she was raped, this sense of lost purity filled her with shame. She shares, "And then in terms of, like, what I experienced, like, with sexual assault, yeah, it made me feel an immense amount of shame."

Additionally, the self-blame Morgan put on herself for being raped brought up feelings of shame. She described, "Feeling that shame of like, well, this could have been avoided if you would have just not gone [to his house]." She also described how this blame she directed towards herself was confirmed by her partner. A few months after being raped, she told her boyfriend that she had had sex with this friend from school when she had not wanted to, and her boyfriend responded by informing her what happened was her fault, a response that brought up even more shame in her. She shares:

> I was met with a response of, "Well, this was your fault. Like, why did you let that happen to you? Like, if you wouldn't have been hanging out with him alone, this wouldn't have happened." Yeah, I remember feeling a lot of, like, shame and sadness and a lot of like…oh, so, like, like, my feelings that I'm having about myself must be right then, because someone else that I care about is telling me this.

Morgan also experienced shame when she shifted her perception of the sexual assault from having had sex to having been raped. She had believed that only promiscuous women or women who are prostitutes (both of which can be associated with shame) are sexually assaulted, which led her to deny that she was sexually assaulted because she believed she would need to be a woman like that, which would be shameful. She shares:

> When you come to the realization of, like, no, you were sexually assaulted, it's like, you almost kind of want to, like, push back against it and be like, no, no, I wasn't, I wasn't. Because then the narrative that I was taught was like, oh, only yeah, like, promiscuous people get sexually assaulted, and you're only going to get sexually assaulted if, like, you're, like, a prostitute or something,

Katherine spoke about how she felt shame and guilt over her history of sexual abuse. Because what happened to her as a child was extreme physical and sexual abuse, she talks about how she would overgeneralize her experience because of her own shame and to protect others' feelings. She states:

> I still had a lot of shame and guilt over my past, because it just was something nobody had ever heard of, you know, and it was just so...so I never ever shared details, necessarily, I would always be like, "yeah, I was abused," you know, very stupid general, and also purposefully, because people can only handle so much detail before they're terrified.

Ivy spoke about how she had little shame about her experiences of sexual assault, since while she did have some self-blame, her primary perspective was that she saw the offenders as responsible. She shares:

> I think I was quite fortunate in that my first reaction to, particularly like the last two instances that I mentioned, was anger and a feeling that I had been violated and been like, touched wrongly and like that I didn't….I didn't revert like right to shame, and I didn't stay in any type of shame, and I didn't….I didn't feel particularly like these were my fault, like I mentioned, yeah, I had those thoughts like….maybe if I was a bit more careful, these things wouldn't have happened. But I think overall, overall, I didn't.

Spiritual

The participants shared various impacts their experience of sexual assault had on their spirituality. One participant expressed how she became a Christian partly as a way to heal from abuse, and that her unique experiences have given her more flexibility in thought than some other Christians. The latter experience of broader thinking from survivors within religion has also been reported by Whiteley (2019). Ivy shared that her experience of being assaulted by a pastor did not lessen her faith, unlike findings from other research (McGraw et al., 2019), but did diminish her belief that Christian men were more moral than non-Christians. A study on religious experience after abuse found that those who are survivors of abuse of any kind are more likely to report feeling distant from God (Seballo, 2007), which was the experience of one participant.

For Ivy, the sexual assaults she experienced had only a small impact on her relationship to Christianity and personal spirituality. She shares how after the last experience of being assaulted by her youth pastor, she questioned the narrative she had been told that Christians were more moral than non-Christians, particularly when looking for men to date. She states:

> I remember being like, why would I want to like - why am I looking for Christian guys when like, Christian guys kind of aren't any better, and maybe even are worse than non-

> Christian people in terms of, like, respecting women and being kind and loving. Like that felt like my experience.

Despite Ivy being assaulted by her youth pastor, she separated his actions from the religion he represented and did not change her commitment to Christianity because of his actions. She shares:

> I still thought God was good and that people made mistakes….I still believed for a long time and like, so that happened when I was 12, and it wasn't till I was 25 that I started to, like, question things and stop being a Christian….I didn't really put it on Christianity. I put it on the people.

Katherine found Christianity in her search for healing and meaning following childhood abuse. Her relationship with God has impacted her in significant positive and protectives ways, including protecting her from completing suicide. She shares:

> I think because of my deep need for something else, seeking for something more in this world, seeking for something that is the only thing that can heal and fill the holes that you have, is what brought me to Christianity to begin with, on the, on the brink of suicide. So I was like, well, literally, God, I'm going to kill myself if you don't change things, if you're real, do something. And he did something.

Katherine has reflected on why she was drawn to the religion of Christianity in particular, wondering if she was drawn to a faith community where women were meant to be led by men because she was used to being a submissive role in abuse in her childhood. She shares:

> I've often asked myself the question, did I become a Christian because it fits so well with like, abused women, you know?....The traditional church roles will often keep women in a role that you already feel like you're in. So it's kind of normal, you know?....It's

> comfortable, more comfortable than maybe if women were powerful and, and they were in charge of the church and they had a voice. It's totally opposite.

Katherine added that being a survivor of abuse and sexual assault has given her more empathy for others than some Christians she has encountered have. She states:

> Abuse impacted the way that I believe things very differently than a lot of other Christians might look at things….I have a lot more love and acceptance for people, no matter what their walk, their faith walk, or other religion, it doesn't - or lack thereof, or atheism - doesn't matter to me. You're human, and I love you as much as I possibly can, because you deserve it.

Morgan's experience of negative emotions connected to Catholicism after being sexually assaulted (fear, guilt, disgust, and shame) led her to letting go of belief in many Catholic teachings and eventually was one of the reasons she left the Catholic Church altogether. She shares:

> I mean, I kind of had, like, not like, left the church, but I had, like, put those teachings behind me, like, before I had graduated high school, but more so I was like, yeah, this is something that I just feel like I need to distance myself from for the time being.

Rachel shared that she left the Catholic Church for a period of time around the age where she was sexually assaulted. In part, she left because Catholic teachings on sexuality and gender had caused her shame, both related to the sexual assault and other parts of her life; however, she acknowledges the difficulty in looking at cause and effect and believes there were many things that lead to her stepping back from her faith for a time before returning as a young adult. She states:

> It was around that period of my life that I left, like, left the church for a little bit. And I think maybe, so…I think there was a lot of like hurt and kind of like confusion and things like that. And I definitely like, now looking back on it, like, I do think that, like, the way that some things were taught to me were like, not - not kind and not like, definitely didn't take into consideration, like, sexual abuse and assault, which is, like, really disappointing, because it's very common, right?

Mary initially saw being raped as consensual sex, which for her at the time meant she had sinned by having premarital sex. Because of this, she felt she could not share this experience with God and experienced a profound sense of separation from him.

> When I think to how I was thinking at that time, I really had this significant area where I felt that I was outside God's law, God's order, and so I couldn't pour out my heart and consult and receive guidance from that step forward….I thought that I was somehow cut off from God. And that I was just outside, so I really saw myself as suddenly going from a really connected spirituality to this big unknown.

Summary of Theme 3

The effects of sexual assault were significant for participants, impacting worth, emotions, and spirituality. Four participants felt that being sexually assaulted effected their sense of worth, whether that was their worth because they felt like they had committed sexual sin, or because they had lost value as a potential spouse due to loss of virginity. Notably, one participant was negatively impacted by Christian teachings on sexual purity, believing her worth had gone down in the eyes of herself and others, but believed that God had made her clean and whole and in his eyes she had worth. Participants experienced many emotions, including confusion, disgust, violation, fear, guilt, and shame. For some participants, certain emotions were tied to perception

of the assault and Christian teachings, while for others, the reported emotions, like disgust, were not tied to their experience of Christianity. Some participants shared that while they have shifted their spiritual and religious beliefs, being sexually assaulted was not particularly relevant to those changes. Others shared that their experience was partly why they temporarily or permanently left their Christian faith, while another participant shared that being a survivor of sexual abuse was something that drew her to Christianity in the first place. Self-worth, emotions, and spirituality are three important areas where participants shared the impacts of being sexually assaulted.

Theme 4 Navigating Disclosure

This theme examines the experience of the participants around disclosure. Disclosure can be an important moment for a survivor. A negative response from another person following disclosure can lead to an increase in PTSD symptoms, while receiving positive social support after disclosure has been shown to lessen PTSD symptoms through greater perceived control over recovery (Ullman & Peter-Hagene, 2014). Participants spoke about feeling isolated after the sexual assault, and how this impacted them and their spirituality. Then, participants described what prevented them from disclosure, which includes everything from sex being taboo to speak about in Christian circles to protecting the offender and others who knew them. Finally, participants who did disclose the assault shared what others' responses were and how these affected them.

Isolation

All five participants shared that they had periods of isolation following sexual assault, where, for various reasons, they did not disclose what had happened to them. Two participants described how they felt isolated navigating their emotions on their own after sexual assault; one participant shared how she was physically far from home and this contributed to her isolation;

another participant described how the highly traumatic nature of her abuse made her feel alone in her experience; lastly one participant shared how she felt socially withdrawn and felt separated from God. Whiteley's (2019) qualitative research with sexual assault survivors from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints also found that a common experience after assault was feeling alone. The experience of feeling distant from God is in line with a study that found a correlation between the experience of abuse (in this study, participants had undergone physical and/or sexual abuse) and a lack of perceived closeness to God (Kennedy & Drebing, 2002).

As shared in Theme 2, Morgan experienced intense feelings of disgust and shame after being raped, but did not disclose to anyone what had happened. The self-blame and taboo around sex which triggered part of these feelings contributed to why she did not disclose what happened, as will be discussed in the next subtheme, and caused further damage as she was left to deal with them completely on her own.

Rachel had been sexually abused twice, and while in one of those instances did disclose not long after the assault, the first time she was assaulted did not disclose until years later. Like Morgan, Rachel had to navigate thoughts of self-blame and feelings of shame on her own.

Ivy's experience of emotional isolation following sexual assault was tied to physical isolation. She had been sexually assaulted by a youth pastor on a church retreat, and as a 12-year-old away from home felt that she had no other options. She said, "It felt like there was nowhere else to go or nothing else to do…What am I going to do? I'm 12 hours from home."

Katherine felt alone because of the horrific nature of the childhood abuse she endured. Aside from one experience of disclosure as a child, Katherine did not tell anyone about the abuse she experienced. First, she knew that almost no one could relate to her experience, and second, she felt alone because others could not handle even hearing what she went through.

> So I was very, first of all, I'm a unique case. There's some people who've been abused, but then there's people who have been through what I've been through, which is, I've almost never heard of anyone, in fact, who's gone through the severity of things that I've gone through. So it makes you very different to begin with. It just makes you odd and just makes you very, very, very different.

Mary also experienced a sense of separation from God. As a young adult during this time, she was a devout Christian and spoke to God about every single part of her life. However, since she saw this rape as sin she now felt a barrier between herself and God.

> When I think to how I was thinking at that time, I really had this significant area where I felt that I was outside God's law, God's order, and so I couldn't pour out my heart and consult and receive guidance from that step forward. So it was, it was very profoundly impactful, in the way that I thought about and responded to the experience, the way that I believed that I was outside God's law. So I was really without help at that stage. I was really without, and without insight and without light.

Through a powerful metaphor, she describes the experience:

> I felt like I wanted to talk to God, but there is a big gray wall in the mist, and there was just like this wall went on infinitely, and there was no way around it or over it, and it was just this misty, gray, foggy, dense, solid wall between me and him.

Inhibiting factors

Each participant spoke about things that held them back from disclosing the sexual assault. One of the commonly cited reasons was fear of negative perception from others. Another reason participants did not disclose was to protect others, either the offender or others around them. Other participants spoke about feeling powerless and like they did not have a voice. The

desire to protect the offender, stemming from the female role to care for men, was found to be a theme in survivors of assault who were not specifically Christian as well (Spencer et al., 2017). However, McKinzie and Richards (2022) argue that women are impacted by this even more in Christian spaces, finding that women were conditioned not to "sow division" (p. 759) and were discouraged from reporting abuse in church spaces.

Rachel describes how she holds fear that she will be judged negatively if she shares she has been sexually assaulted. Despite the fact that she knows it was not her fault, she feels concerned about what others will think. She ponders this as she says, "So I guess like that somewhere within me, I guess, I must still think that it somehow reflects badly on me, which doesn't make any sense really, but yeah." She shares how even with her boyfriend she had fear of being perceiving negatively. She states:

> I think I had a lot of like anxiety in my, even in my current relationship, to like, because we're both Catholic, to tell him about what had happened and just like thinking, like worried that he would think less of me or something because of because of that situation.

For Mary, she did not disclose the situation because of fear or judgement from acting outside of Christian teachings. Mary was one of the participants who initially normalized the situation, perceiving it to be her own choice to have sex with her boyfriend, which meant that she thought others would regard it as sinful. Being raped was the beginning of being sexually active with her boyfriend, but she navigated that experience and subsequent sexual activity which she engaged in to "correct" the initial experience of sex (the assault), which was her first experience of sexual contact, with almost no information because of her lack of sex-education. Because she saw the assault as sexual activity and engaging in sexual activity was considered sinful, she felt

she could not ask family members or her community for information about contraception or pleasure, and instead had few sources in a pre-internet time.

> My sources were people or books, and I didn't, I couldn't go for personal knowledge or insight, because I was operating outside that system where my knowledge sources would have been. So it would have been okay to seek information about birth control, for example, if I were married or if I was planning on getting married or engaged, but it wasn't, it wasn't acceptable because I was outside the rules.

Morgan also appraised her rape as being normal sexual activity, and this contributed to her not disclosing it to anyone. In her family and in Catholic school, speaking about sex was taboo. She describes how teachers would "not even say the correct body parts. They would like, censor the words, almost, which is, to me now, is like crazy." She describes how she felt so much shame over having engaged in sexual activity that she believed she needed to always keep this experience to herself. She shares:

> And then, yeah, there was that, like, shame piece, like.…I feel embarrassed to tell people about even just talking about sex, because it was so taboo, so I'm like anything around it, like I need to not, like, tell anyone about this ever, because it was such a taboo topic.

Ivy remembers being scared that if she told someone about her sexual assault, she would be partially blamed. As she reflects on her thought process as a 13-year-old, she struggles to express what she means, trying to capture the nuance of her beliefs at the time.

> But if I know myself like, when things like that, if something like that happened, I would be like...oh, how do I explain this? I feel like, if I went home and told my mom this guy did this to me at school, I didn't know if she like, I think I felt like maybe she would either like, she would be like... I don't think there's any truth to this, but I feel like she…I

> thought at that age, if I told my mom, she might be like, "how, how did he think he could do that to you? What did you, like?" [laughs] Do you know what I mean? Like, "why did a boy like," almost believing that I would have had to be like in some sort of game beforehand that led someone to do that to me.

Katherine also had a fear of judgement that prevented her from disclosing the sexual assault, particularly to those in her Christian community. For her, part of that was because of her appraisal of the assaults; in her mind, there was conflict about whether it was her "fault," which would make it sex, or if it was the offender's, which would make it abuse. If it was the abuser's fault, she would feel more open to share, but if it was her fault, there would be more shame around it because that would mean she had chosen to have sex outside marriage, which would have been seen as a sin.

> And then there's the oddity of not being able to share a lot of the stuff, because you know that sexuality is such a hot topic and you're not sure how to unravel the difference between your fault, their fault, because it all seems to be wrapped in your fault anyways, like you chose it somehow, even as a kid, or it was your fault, like you could have done something as a kid.

Kathrine shared that another part of her fear of judgement from others had to do with the gender of those who had abused her as a child. She had been abused by both men and women, and she felt more hesitant to share that she had been abused by women because homosexuality was a sin in her Christian denomination.

> I think probably more stigma with females, or I felt like there was stigma, more stigma, because then I felt like, then that because of the, being abused by women, it also messes with your thoughts on your sexuality, because you're like, well, then I must be a lesbian,

> or I must be, you know, like it really messes with all kinds of things…So there was a lot more resistance to share any of that, forget, you know, just saying generally abuse, but I'm not going to say too much detail about who or what gender.

One participant did not disclose out of a desire to protect or care for others, including the offender. Rachel described how she was assaulted by a teenager her age and how because their families were close, she wanted to protect his reputation and did not want his family to think poorly of him and have to come to terms with the fact their son would do that. Rachel believes that the female Christian role of serving others negatively impacted her in this area by putting the offender's needs above her own. She shares:

> I think they're they, they're probably unhelpful, because I think part of it was also like, "oh, I don't want, like, I don't want anyone to think badly of this person or whatnot," that like, instinct to, like, you know, take care of people and, like, see everyone in the best light and stuff like that. I actually think that's quite toxic….That's how I've always felt, of like, this idea of like, being like, supportive of other people and taking care of them and stuff like that. And then, like, when you do that with people who are like, who have hurt you, that's just, that's just not healthy.

Ivy described how she also felt like the Christian female role can interfered with a woman disclosing sexual assault. She describes how the expectations she internalized for women to please others and not be disruptive contribute to staying silent, sharing, "well, I can't really make a fuss because a woman shouldn't get angry." Like Rachel, she also felt the instinct to protect the offender, which she did by trying to "not make a big deal out of it" because she "didn't want to make him feel bad."

Two participants described how powerlessness contributed to a lack of disclosure. Ivy felt powerless in part because the offender was in a position of religious power. She describes how on the same youth group trip after the assault occurred, she spilled a drink on her clothes and had to be brought back to where they were staying. She remembers feeling deeply uncomfortable about going back with the youth pastor since she was worried he would watch her change through a window, but she felt like she could not say anything. She states, "At that time, this youth leader was very well liked and I did not feel like I could just say 'No, I am not going to go back and change with this guy.'" She sees age, gender, and the nature of the assault as factors as well, saying of her experience, "I'm a, a young girl [13 years old] I don't really have, like, who's going to think that that is a reason to complain is like, a youth leader slapping your butt."

Katherine also found that feeling powerless was something that contributed to her staying silent about the assaults. As a Christian woman, she felt like she did not have a voice, particularly to speak against a man's actions.

> So I think from that perspective, impacting the fact that it kept me in a voiceless position, I think, yeah, because you're still in this characterization of the feminine role and where, yeah, she's "other than," she's only able to do, you know, work at home, and she doesn't really have anything to say. If there's something wrong that the man does, well, you just have to deal with it.

Responses from Others

Even with these inhibiting factors, four participants disclosed the sexual assault at some point. The reactions from others can be categorized into positive (believing the participant, taking protective measures, providing support and acceptance) and negative (minimizing, victim-

blaming, protecting the offender), with some participants experiencing a mix of both. These categories correspond to the Social Response Questionnaire developed by Ullman and Peter-Hagene (2014) and shed light on what the experience is like for a narrower population, which is in line with Ullman's recommendations for future research (Ullman, 2024). In a Christian context, disclosure can often be met with dismissal or victim-blaming (McKinzie & Richards, 2022), which is in line with the experiences of some participants, while others received support from those in their community to whom they disclosed their experience of sexual assault.

Rachel shared how she disclosed to her mother that she had been sexually assaulted by a driving instructor. After Rachel's mother asked why she did not want to take another driving lesson with the instructor, Rachel told her what had happened. Rachel's mother believed her and did not book any more lessons with him. Additionally, her mother told their family friend who had recommended him, "You should not recommend him anymore. He made, like, my daughter, really uncomfortable."

Morgan experienced both positive and negative reactions to disclosure. The first time she disclosed having been raped, at the time what she framed as having had sex when she did not want to, it was to her boyfriend at 16, who reinforced the self-blame she already had. She states:

> I was, like, met with a response of, 'Well, this was your fault. Like, why did you let that happen to you? Like, if you wouldn't have been hanging out with him alone, this wouldn't have happened.'….I remember feeling a lot of, like, shame and sadness and a lot of like, oh, so, like, like, my feelings that I'm having about myself must be right then, because someone else that I care about is telling me this….I must've just, like, let this happen to me and then, like, it is my, like, my fault.

A couple of years later, after Morgan connected with a friend and realized what she had experienced was sexual assault, she told a teacher at her school what had happened. The teacher responded by validating the experience and putting the blame on the offender, which helped Morgan understand her feelings of disgust and discomfort after the experience. She states:

> We ended up telling [a teacher] when we were in grade 12, and like, he was super wonderful, and, like, super validating. And, yeah, it was nice to hear someone be like, "What happened to you is not okay and it is assault." And I think that was like, just hearing that from, like, someone older made me be like….my feelings are right about what I was feeling.

Katherine also had mixed responses from people when she disclosed the sexual abuse she experienced. The first time she disclosed was when she was a child, and this resulted in her being placed in foster care and going through years of court resulting in the case being dismissed. This caused her to feel like she was not believed and that reporting was futile, especially because it resulted in the loss of her family. She states:

> And so because of that reason, the one time I shared something, I felt like it was futile, but I was never anyways, and that it was because I lost everything already, family, everything, even though the family was some so terrible to be around anyways, it's still your family. It's still like, it's very odd, but it's very, it's like, you know that syndrome, it's going to come to me, when you're in prison [Stockholm Syndrome]…..So yeah, because of that very reason, pretty much any disclosure of any kind until I was an adult, did not…I was too terrified and programmed, really, to share anything, and then, yeah, didn't think it was worth anything to say anything anyways.

She also described the ways her Christian community responded to her disclosing abuse. Some people welcomed her, while she was stigmatized by others as being less than because of the abuse she had experienced, something that others and she herself had difficulty defining as being sinful or not. She describes:

> You have no choice in that, like you can't just change things and, and make yourself a virgin. God can though, trust me, but you can't change the past. So if people were to find out, then there is a kind of ostracization that can happen….I'm not saying all are, but because of the teaching, some people tend to stay away from you, right? "Well, don't you know?" Or there's like, then rumors that good happens, like, "Well, don't date that girl. You know, she's damaged goods," that kind of thing. But then there's also the opposite to people who embrace you with loving arms. And so it's not all bad, it's just the undercurrent is very real.

Ivy's experience with disclosure was negative, involving the assault being minimized and no protective steps taken. After Ivy once again challenged her female youth group leader on whether it had been her that had slapped her buttocks or if it was the male pastor, the female leader admitted that it had been the pastor, but minimized the situation, saying it was just a joke on his part. Ivy states:

> I think I got very emotional, but like, also still very angry and, and, but then someone is literally telling you, "Oh, it's just a joke. And he [youth pastor] just thinks, oh, he's just trying to play with all of us because we're doing that." So I felt like, obviously invalidated. I felt like I probably couldn't or shouldn't be angry over it anymore.

Even though Ivy's first instinct was that what happened was wrong, the response from this adult made her doubt her experience of his action as something upsetting. Furthermore, the youth

leader insinuated that Ivy and the other women were to blame for the youth pastor's actions, since it was only because the women were acting that way with each other that the pastor felt he could too.

Summary of Theme 4

This theme delineates the experiences of the participants around disclosure. The participants shared the experience of feeling isolated after sexual assault, which included how they had to navigate intense feelings and their sexuality on their own, how they felt strange compared to others, and how they felt separated from God. The subtheme of inhibiting factors discussed the various reasons that participants did not disclose the sexual assault(s), including fear of judgement from others, the desire to protect others, and feeling powerless due to the offender's identity or internalized gendered roles. The last subtheme explored others' responses to disclosure, some of which were protective and validating, and others that caused harm and did not protect vulnerable persons.

Theme 5 – Pathways to Healing

The final theme explores how the participants healed from sexual assault. Posttraumatic growth is a concept proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) that looks at trauma recovery from a perspective of growth and not a symptom reduction lens. Posttraumatic growth was examined in the current study by inviting participants to speak about ways that they have healed. Agency in their own sexuality was a key theme for three of the participants. For other participants, connection with others facilitated healing, whether with friends, family, or romantic partners. Several participants experienced spirituality as a path to healing. For others, therapy played a key role. These subthemes show the variety pathways to healing and come together as an important final theme to consider.

Sexuality and Agency

For three participants, reclaiming agency over their own sexuality included both holding the offender accountable for their actions and reframing sex as something the participants could now choose and enjoy. Cognitive reframing of the event is a commonly used coping strategy for sexual assault healing (Lamade et al., 2025) and is part of how participants in this study reclaimed their agency. Learning about consent and sexual pleasure were also ways that participants healed, a pathway in line with Haines' (2007) model of healing after sexual abuse.

The way one participant framed agency around the sexual assault was a protective factor for her. Ivy felt that she "did not need particular healing" because of the way that she immediately ascribed blame to the offender. While she did experience some behavioural self-blame, she was able to quickly let go of that by validating the other's responsibility for their own actions and relying on feelings of anger that something wrong had been done to her. She shared:

> It made me feel gross that like a grown man…like that instance, specifically, I was like, "ew like, why did you do that?" And, but I do think it was, like, kind of protective that I was, like, so angry, and I knew right away, like this, you're gross, not me.

For Rachel, part of healing was cognitive reframing of the event to see that she did not have responsibility, or agency, over the assault. She describes this as "thinking very rationally" to talk herself out of self-blame and validate the offender's accountability. She shared:

> Just because you were, you know, in this position, even though you were drunk and stuff like that, like that, doesn't take away the fact that, like, he did something that was wrong and that has nothing to like, that has nothing to do with you.

Morgan re-wrote what sexuality and agency mean to her. One of the reasons Morgan had normalized the rape as sexual experience was that she understood sex to be one-sided: that a man

does something to a woman (opposed to mutual participation), and that a man's pleasure is what is important. She learned this from a Christian perspective, since it was important for the man to orgasm as that is what is necessary for conception, which was purported to be the purpose of sex by her Catholic education. So, part of the healing process for her was both to embrace her own sexual pleasure as equally important as a man's during sex and to see herself as an active participant during sex. She shared:

> My pleasure is also, like, important and valid and like, like, that's part of sex is like, it being a pleasurable experience. It's not something that's like, done to you, which took a lot of years to unlearn, because at the time, that's like, what my experience was, and yeah, it made me feel like, shameful about myself, about my own body, and I felt like, oh, yeah, like, this is not like, I don't want to masturbate or anything. I don't want to do any of that, because that's like, gross and weird and like, wrong and like, I don't want to be like, naked unless it's like, for a man, because that's like, what I've been taught about, that's what you do. That's what like, that's what the norm is.

For Mary, learning about sex and consent were key parts of her healing. This was part of what allowed her to experience sexuality in the context of a safe relationship where consent could be given or withheld without impacting emotional intimacy in the relationship. She shares:

> What has been specifically impactful for me in my healing journey? The loving relationship and respectful relationship, inclusive of sex, vulnerable sex and the sense of having that safety to say no and still stay connected, and yeah and it's, it's a journey. It's still a journey for me.

Connection

Three of the participants spoke about the importance of connection with others to their healing, a finding that agrees with previous research on sexual assault recovery. A mixed-methods study about sexual assault of 1,392 female university students found that social support was the most reported healthy strategy that survivors use to cope (Lamade et al., 2025). This is supported by previous research which found that positive social support lowered posttraumatic and depressive symptoms (Campbell et al., 2009). The current study is aligned with this research since two participants shared how social support has helped them. Another participant shared how experiencing intimacy within a safe romantic relationship has facilitated healing, which is an avenue for healing cited by participants in a study by Nixon (2024).

Morgan shared how a couple of years after she was sexually assaulted in high school, she had a conversation with a classmate and discovered she had had a similar experience with their mutual friend. She describes it as a "pivotal" moment in her journey:

> And, like, it's such a weird, bittersweet thing, because I remember in the moment, like, feeling such a close bond to this person, and feeling like, you get it, like you understand what I went through. And obviously everyone is different, but like, we have a shared experience with like, the same person, and we were able to, like, just talk about it without any judgment or shame because we had both been through it. But then also, I remember feeling a great, like, an immense amount of sadness for like, I can't believe like, this is what I'm bonding with someone over, you know, like, what, like, a like, what a beautiful experience to get, to have someone who like, understands what you're going through. But also like, it like, broke my heart, because I was like, I never want anyone to like experience what I'm experiencing, because it was terrible and horrible.

After discovering this shared experience, Morgan and her friend researched what they were experiencing online and found articles about sexual assault. Connecting with each other was the impetus to acknowledge what happened to them as sexual assault and begin to heal.

Katherine spoke about ways connection has contributed to her healing. For her, this has been through connecting with others who share her faith, like through mentorships and "seeking advice in the spiritual context." She also found that seeing positive examples of Christian masculinity, like men who display leadership and protection, helped unwarp her perception of those qualities because of damaging experiences she had had with masculinity. She shares:

> I think sometimes it can also be redemptive too, in the sense of, I'll use my, my past father-in-law. He was a very masculine man, yet his intentions were always pretty pure, and he was a good man, and he was, and he was a good Bible believing man and an elder in the church and his role taught me what men should have been in my life.

Mary also spoke about the healing power of relationships in her life. After our interview, Mary sent me a list of resources that have helped her be able to form close emotional relationships, including "The Power of Vulnerability" by Brene Brown (Brown, 2011), Sue Johnson's *Hold Me Tight* (2008), and resources for self-compassion and emotion regulation.

Spirituality

While all participants shared the presence of spirituality in their current lives, three of the participants spoke about how spirituality has been a part of their healing journey. Spirituality played a role in providing a container for healing through personal relationship with God and undoing gendered powerlessness. The experience of the participants is in line with qualitative studies that have found religion to be a resilience factor when there is the element of personal relationship with God (Pooler & Barros-Lane, 2022) and that religious coping can be a resilience

factor for survivors (Whiteley, 2019). Additionally, a systematic review of women's posttraumatic growth after sexual victimization found that religious engagement increased positive connection to self (Guggisberg et al., 2021).

Two participants found healing within Christian spirituality. While Rachel did feel like certain Catholic beliefs around modesty for women increased her guilt and shame after her assault, she also shared this positive aspect about her experience as a Catholic:

> I think it's beautiful because, like, I think there's a lot of, like, healing and stuff. I think there's room, like, you know, for prayer and healing within the church, like within like, having a faith and stuff like that.

Her faith is a central part of her life and she has found prayer to be a way for her to process the experience of sexual assault and move forward from it.

Katherine also found healing within Christianity, particularly in her personal relationship with God. She speaks about a complex relationship with Christian individuals and church communities and the rejection and judgement she sometimes received from them, but that God's love for her was not complicated and was a core part of her personal healing after childhood sexual abuse.

> At 15, when I, what's called is like, you know, I gave my heart to the Lord, I gave my heart to Jesus. So in that moment, that personal relationship made me clean. Made me feel completely clean and pure. It was this completely unconditional love experience. It was a definitely spiritual experience that was the biggest one of my life still.

In addition to increasing her sense of self, Katherine also found meaning by finding purpose in learning to provide trauma-informed spiritual support to others that she did not receive. As stated by Cobbina and Boynton (2025), finding purpose through helping others is an important part of

posttraumatic growth found through spirituality. Katherine describes how a Christian church gave her “spirit-led” ministry that, while well-intentioned, caused harm to herself because of a lack of knowledge about posttraumatic stress disorder. For example, the group mistakenly categorized traumatic flashbacks as episodes caused by demonic forces, the spiritual treatment of which caused re-traumatization. Katherine shares of her desire to correct this:

> …and that's kind of part of the reason why I went to school to begin with, was because I wanted to bring spiritual wisdom, experience, personal experience, lived experience, along with education, the trifecta, and bring that to the church and bring that to individuals who have been hurting and have been hurting through, been hurt through the church, etc, as well, because there is a lack of education and kind of like, too much leaning on being spirit led and missing the boat because we're humans and not enough balance in between.

For Morgan, finding healing through spirituality was a process that began when she stepped away from Catholicism. This gave her distance from Christian teachings on sexuality that had contributed to feelings of guilt and shame after she had been sexually assaulted. Spirituality became a positive factor for her when she reconnected to beliefs and practices from her Indigenous background on her mother’s side. Connecting with her Indigenous spirituality allowed Morgan to unlearn the female gender role that kept her in a submissive role and instead find freedom as a woman. She notes:

> And then also, just like reconnecting myself, you know, with like my, with like my, the Indigenous teachings, because it's so different in a way, like there's so much more emphasis on like matriarchy and community and like protecting women than trying to control them.

Therapy

Several participants spoke about the impact that psychotherapy has had on their healing. In Lamade et al.'s (2025) study on women's coping strategies following sexual assault, counselling was the fifth strategy on the list.

For Katherine, it was important to seek therapy from a non-Christian counsellor, even while being a Christian herself. She shared that sometimes she thinks Christians are "too much leaning on being spirit led and missing the boat because we're humans and not enough balance in between." Attending therapy in a non-Christian context and focusing on the non-spiritual side of healing was important to her recovery.

Morgan described how therapy impacted her in several ways. Therapy helped her reframe her freeze response during the rape and "accept that, like, okay, I did the best that I could in that moment," letting go of the self-blame she previously held and putting accountability on the offender. Through therapy, she also rewrote her understanding that her sexual past lowered her worth as a woman. She had internalized this belief from both secular and Christian environments, and since she had viewed the sexual assault as her own fault, included it as something that lowered her value to others, particularly men. Therapy helped her recognize this and untangle the connection between worth and sexuality, both for the sexual assault and consensual sexual experiences.

Mary had mixed experiences with therapy. She shared that helpful therapy she has experienced has been that which fosters a deeper awareness and connection to her body, which for her was somatic therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction practices. However, Mary also experienced therapy that she found was not helpful in helping her heal from her experience.

One of the reasons Mary decided to do this study is because she wants therapists to better understand what sexual assault is like for someone with her experience. She found that Christian counsellors who she saw had difficulty understanding her extreme lack of sexual knowledge and struggle with a lack of agency in a relationship. She stated:

> When I was seeking support from counselors without that kind of, without that background, it was hard for them to identify or understand that you know, that somebody could be raised and come to that age and stage of life with so little knowledge around sexuality, and when seeking help from like, I can think of male Christian counselors, or that one Christian counselor at university, or it was just, it was so inadequate. There was just no, no real grappling with women's experience and what agency means for women and sex and so it was just lacking. No, I would go as far to say some of the impacts were negative, but, and harmful, but some of, most of it was just missing. Just, just a lot of missing support where there could have been support that would work within that framework.

Mary went on to say that she felt her progress in healing was slowed with many counsellors over the years due to their lack of understanding. Because of that, she feels "really glad to be able to offer my story and perspective…I think it really matters, and I'm really grateful that you're doing the research, and I'm really happy to offer my part."

Summary of Theme 5

Four pathways to healing were identified in the participants' responses. For several participants, healing through sexuality and agency meant cognitively reframing the sexual assault to assign blame to the offender, learning about sexual consent, and learning about female sexual pleasure. Other participants experienced healing through connection with others, through

vulnerability about their sexual assault experiences in friendships, experiencing consensual sex with a partner, and experiencing a man who demonstrated positive Christian masculinity (unlike the offender). Personal spirituality was an important component for other participants, two within the Christian faith (particularly their personal relationships with God), and one in connection with her Indigenous spirituality (especially experiencing how women are honoured in her tradition). Finally, therapy facilitated healing for some participants. These pathways provide insight to mental health workers about how women can experience healing.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Review and Interpretation of the Findings

This study aimed to understand the way women survivors of sexual assault who were exposed to Christian teachings about sexuality or gender make meaning of their experiences. Five women who self-identified as part of this population were interviewed through this study, and, using semi-structured interviews, were given prompts to share what they considered to be most important about their stories. A double-hermeneutic occurred through this study, first through the participants interpreting their own experiences, and second through the researcher interpreting those responses and finding subthemes which were placed together into superordinate themes among the five participants. The results of this research can be summarized as three main findings.

Silence Around Sexuality and Sexual Assault

There was a pervasive thread of silence around sexuality and sexual assault woven throughout all of the participants' stories, which is reflected throughout the superordinate themes. Participants shared that a lack of education around sexual assault, consent, and sexuality

led to vulnerability to sexual assault. The lack of sexual education the participants described has been prevalent in Christian circles; for example, Gregoire et al. (2023) describe:

> Sex ed has become a minefield in Christian circles because we've tried to avoid giving education around sex in favor of giving warnings not to do it. While many of us did not understand basic information about how sex works, we all knew one thing, loud and clear: never, ever do it until you're married (p. 150).

Similarly, the lack of education around sexuality included education around sexual assault. The lack of sexual education around consent reported by the participants is in line with previous research that found Christian dating books lacking in meaningful discussion around consent (Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Moon & Reger, 2014). Christian dating books generally do not go further than instructing girls to "say 'no'" (Moon & Reger, 2014, p. 67) when it comes to sex. Gregoire et al. (2023) suggest that the reason for this may be that there is a fear that education around consent will make it more likely that youth engage in premarital sexual activity.

This lack of sexual education led to normalization of sexual assault for some participants. Without the language of consent, participants were left feeling violated, afraid, and ashamed while blaming themselves for what they perceived as engaging in sinful behaviour. For some participants, this resulted in loneliness and a lack of support while they were coping with something serious and painful. The taboo nature of sex and sexual assault in their families and church communities made disclosing the sexual assault impossible for some participants, again leaving them without support. By not sharing the experience, participants who had normalized the assault were left without anyone else to help identify that what happened to them was wrong.

Silence around sexual assault and sexuality inhibited healing. Conversely, for several participants, learning about sexual consent and assault and sharing their experiences with others were what helped them identify what happened as sexual assault, let go of self-blame, and understand their experiences. A key part of healing for several participants was breaking this silence through sharing in therapy, connecting with other survivors, and through intimate relationships in their lives.

It is important to note that the participants in the study were in their twenties or older, so the Christian communities they were in and Christian materials they consumed were from the 2010s or prior, which means that their experiences do not necessarily reflect recent changes within Christianity. In their book, *She Deserves Better* (2023), authors Gregoire et al. explicitly speak about the negative effects that lack of education about sex and consent can have and encourage Christian parents to provide comprehensive sex education to their kids. This book shows that there are movements within Christianity towards open conversations about women's sexuality, sexual consent, and sexual assault, in general and within Christian settings. However, this move towards open dialogue and education came too late to prevent the harm the women in this study experienced.

Influence of Gender Roles: Passivity and Purity

The impact of the expectations (internalized or external) of themselves as women that the participants shared deeply influenced their experience of sexual assault, particularly in the areas of agency, assertiveness, purity, and pleasure. McKinzie and Richards (2022) note that, "Although many of the norms and expectations of purity culture are present in secular culture, they take exaggerated form in evangelical circles" (p. 747). This is a key factor here as these

elements of gender roles are experienced beyond Christianity; but, while some gender elements coincide with secular culture, the participants viewed them through a religious lens.

The women in the study shared that they learned, often implicitly, that women were meant to be sweet, gentle, and passive, both in a general social context and in the context of a romantic relationship. While some participants felt that they had to "submit" in a literal sense to what a man wanted regardless of their own desire or discomfort (i.e. sex, specific sexual acts, etc.), for others the impact of these internalized expectations came in more subtly, like when one participant felt guilty for practicing assertiveness when she reacting defensively and clearly stated "don't touch me!" in response to unwanted sexual touch. This expectation of passiveness lead to one participant believing it was out of her role to say anything when her boyfriend failed to ask for consent prior to intercourse (rape). The belief that women are passive, even in sex, meant that one participant believed sex was something "done to" her, and lead to her normalizing rape. This internalization of an animalistic view of sex was found in Christian dating books, which portrayed views of women as objects (Moon & Reger, 2014). This, along with the idea the participants had that assertiveness was not a female quality, is concerning also because sexual assertiveness and resistance have been found to be protective against sexual assault (Ullman & Najdowski, 2011).

Viewing premarital sex as a sin and placing a high value on one's sexual purity arose for the participants throughout their stories. While it is in line with many women's experiences of sexual assault to work through who is "to blame," these participants shared an added layer of stress surrounding that question: if they were to blame, they had sinned and lost their purity. Some women in the study shared explicit fears about not being able to find a spouse because

they were not virgins or fearing they would go to Hell. This finding is concurrent with Owen et al.'s (2021) explanation of the interaction between sexual purity and rape. They explain:

> Purity culture purports the idea that a woman's body belongs to her future husband, and her worth lies in her ability to remain a virgin until marriage. This implies that females who have been raped have become impure and have lost a part of their inherent worth (p. 408).

For others, if they viewed the sexual assault as consensual at the time, they experienced guilt and sadness about acting outside of God's will, feeling like they had created distance between themselves and God. Other participants expressed a double standard around sexual purity between men and women, finding that sexual behaviour was excused in men but highly judged in women, creating more pressure to remain pure and increasing guilt and shame after being sexually assaulted. On the other hand, one participant found the concept of purity and sexual sin to be a protective factor for her as she as able to name the offender's actions as wrong immediately since they fell into what was considered sexual sin.

The Paradox of Spirituality

This study explored the stories of women who had been or still are connected to Christianity in some way through teachings of gender and sexuality. The impact of the Christian religion and the participants' own spirituality (through Christianity or otherwise) on their experience of sexual trauma spread far wider than just the impact of the gender and sexual teachings. It was touched on in each theme of the study and in most of the subthemes. Within the many mentions of spirituality, participants had different and sometimes conflicting experiences. Some participants saw their relationship with God and church as a positive and protective factor in their lives, while others spoke about the negative impact it had. This finding corresponds to

prior research that has found that religion and spirituality can be positive factors because of their community support and help meaning making after trauma, they can also be a negative factor because of existential questions after trauma that a religion or spirituality cannot answer or rejection from one's religious community as a result of having experienced trauma (Choruby-Whiteley & Morrow, 2021).

In many ways, spirituality was life-giving and healing for participants. Previous research has also "found that spirituality is an integral part of the healing and coping process" (Smith et al., 2017, p. 116) for survivors of abuse. Within the bounds of Christianity, something that was key for several participants was a personal relationship with a loving God. Not only was this important for coping with sexual assault, but this seemed to be protective against shame over loss of purity, which was more related to how other members of their church or community viewed the participants than how God viewed them. Rather, these participants shared that they believed God saw them as pure and that they felt unconditionally loved by him. Outside of Christianity, one participant found healing by leaving Christianity as it had contributed to fear, shame, and guilt following sexual assault and reconnecting with her Indigenous spirituality.

Conversely, participants experienced negative consequences from involvement in Christianity and spirituality. The view of a loving God that some participants had was not present for all participants, with some expressing a strong fear of Hell and punishment over perceived sexual sin in the assault. For another participant, there was a feeling that she now was cut off from God and that their formerly intimate relationship was ended because she had stepped outside of God's plan for her (at the time, seeing the rape as consensual and therefore sinful). While some participants who had a view of a loving God did experience positives from that relationship, some shared that they had experiences of judgement and rejection from church

communities, or could remember times when sexual teachings brought up feelings of shame and increased the feeling of being an outsider in a church community.

Participants in the study brought complex perspectives on spirituality and Christianity. When asked what might be harmful or helpful for survivors of sexual assault, all participants were able to see parts of the religion that may help or harm women with similar experiences to theirs. The participants who currently identify as Christians shared their hopes for how Christian churches and educators might change how they present the teachings of gender and sexuality to be considerate to survivors of sexual assault, to reduce shame and judgement, and to educate about sexual consent. One participant who no longer identifies as a Christian expressed her hope that Christian communities can help women develop a sense of autonomy and agency around their sexuality.

Implications and Recommendations for Clinicians

These findings provide valuable insight for mental health practitioners to provide support for women survivors who have also received Christian sexual and gender beliefs. As has been seen in the themes and findings, the interaction between these Christian teachings and the experience of sexual assault is complex and varies between individuals. Three of the participants shared that psychotherapy was a part of their healing journey. The findings represent key areas where women have been impacted and are places where mental health practitioners can look for strengths or areas for healing.

The recommendations for clinicians can be summarized through the lens of feminist therapy. Feminist therapy draws from a range of modalities for its interventions (Brown, 2018, p. 97), but it is defined as a therapy by its values and perspectives (Richmond et al., 2013). Brown (2018) describes the overarching goal of feminist therapy as “the empowerment of clients and

the creation of feminist consciousness" (p. 37). This therapy "conceptualizes human experience as taking place in four realms of power – somatic, intrapersonal/intrapsychic, intrapersonal/social-contextual, and spiritual/existential, all in constant exchange and interaction – disempowerment and liberatory empowerment are seen as potentially occurring in any and all of these domains" (Brown, 2018, p. 40). Using this theory, elements of empowerment and disempowerment in the participants' stories will be described through the structure of these four domains of power along with recommendations for how to help participants regain power or amplify power that already exists.

Somatic Power

From a feminist perspective, having somatic power "means being in contact with one's body" and experiencing it as a "safe place" (Brown, 2018, p. 42). It is clear how this is particularly relevant when working with clients who have experienced sexual assault, where their bodily autonomy was violated. Understanding how one's body reacted to what was experienced and ways to reclaim and reconnect to one's body are important parts of reclaiming power in this area.

One component of the relational-cultural feminist theory of trauma is psychoeducation (Brown, 2004), which can be an important part of reclaiming somatic power. Participants experienced shame and anger towards themselves for not reacting when being sexually assaulted. This is considered a "freeze" response, and therapists are encouraged to educate their clients about this, and other, normal and adaptive responses to trauma (Wilkin & Hillock, 2014). This helps clients understand the power of their own body in working to protect them and can reduce feelings of weakness and perceptions of self-blame.

Women survivors of this population may benefit from a variety of interventions, which feminist therapy encourages to incorporate in therapy (Brown, 2018). These interventions should be created in collaboration with clients according to their needs. For example, one participant reported disgust and shame about her body. Morgan shared, "I had to go home and like, again, like, take a shower, like I literally need to go and, like, scrub my body….I remember feeling very like, I don't want to, like, look in the mirror." Another discussed her self-blame around the clothing she was wearing. Both are related to the body but in distinct ways, and interventions for connection to the body will look different for each person. Some of the ways that Brown (2018) suggests to regain power in one's body are strength training, learning a physical art, or nourishing one's body with food that feels good. Because feminist therapy is integrative, the researcher suggests that body-based psychotherapeutic modalities like Somatic Experiencing or Art Therapy may also help participants heal. Mary expressed that engaging in therapy that "emphasized somatic awareness" and practicing yoga nidra had been an important part of her healing.

Intrapersonal and Intrapsychic power

Feminist therapy conceptualizes power in this realm as knowing and understanding one's thoughts, feeling one's emotions about the present, and caring for oneself in a way that causes no harm to others (Brown, 2018). This includes "the capacity to trust in the information available from one's own intuition and inner knowing, and the ability to find sources of information that will expand the range of one's world and capacities" (Brown, 2018, p. 43). Some participants shared how they were taught not to ask questions about sex because they were not married, or how they needed the approval of a man in authority (pastor, father, husband, etc.) before making

an important life decision. Things like this place women in a position of lesser power, increasing vulnerability to assault and complicating the experience after it.

Increasing one's intrapersonal power can be done through working with ways that disempowerment has happened in regard to identity. One of the findings from the study was that sexual assault impacted the participants' identities in many ways, including their self-worth, their religious and spiritual identity, and their social identity and perceived worth to others. Rachel shared, "I had a lot of anxiety in my, even in my current relationship….because we're both Catholic, to tell him about what had happened….worried that he would think less of me or something because of because of that situation." Therapists can help clients look at the broader social context where they developed beliefs that sexual assault negatively impacts their identity and worth, and empower clients to decide how to define their identity for themselves. In particular, therapists can work with clients to incorporate feminist perspectives into their identity, an approach which has been shown to reduce body shame and which can help clients see the ways they have grown even through the traumatic experience (Richmond et al., 2013).

Focusing on how individuals can trust themselves and their emotions is a key part of this work. Participants explained how they felt like something was wrong but did not have the language to describe what it was or their story was dismissed by others when they disclosed the assault. Ivy told an adult youth group leader about their youth pastor sexually assaulting her, and the leader responded by telling Ivy, "'it's [it was] just a joke.'" Ivy reflects, "So I felt like, obviously invalidated. I felt like I probably couldn't or shouldn't be angry over it anymore." From a feminist therapy perspective, therapists help empower the client to believe themselves and their own story. Brown (2004) describes, "Empowerment will thus have the effect of leaving trauma survivors more capable of believing themselves and seeing themselves as a source of authority

about their life narratives" (p. 469). Morgan shared that therapy helped her recognize that a sexual assault "was his [the offender's] fault" and let go of self-blame. Empowering the client to control their own story and to establish their own identity are ways therapists can work with clients in this realm of power.

Interpersonal and Social-contextual Power

Feminist therapy sees interpersonal and social-contextual power as one of the central ways that individuals hold their power. Brown (2018) states: "Powerful people forgive themselves their humanity and are able to forgive the humanity of others but do not forget to protect themselves from people who are unsafe emotionally or physically to them" (p. 43). A feminist therapist takes this concept of what it means to be a powerful person and examines the ways that someone has had that power taken away and how to reclaim it. For the population of the current study, there are several areas where interpersonal and social-contextual power could be worked on in treatment.

Participants in the study learned that as women, they should not assert themselves over men. Mary describes, "I was to be passive and responsive and receptive, and the man was to take initiative and leadership and think ahead." In therapy, this can be explored by inviting the client to consider from where this idea came, how it has impacted their experience of sexual assault and their life, and to what extent they want to hold that idea in their life now. Richmond et al. (2013) suggest that clients can practice assertiveness in therapy by collaborating with the therapist to form a treatment plan and expressing needs or discomforts as they arise.

The type of interpersonal power to be claimed by individuals may depend on the relationship to their offender. Participants in this study had a variety of different relationships to their offenders which seemed to have impacted them in different ways. All the women in the

study were assaulted at least once by a known offender, which elicited confusion or disbelief. For example, Morgan states, “I'm feeling angry because….I can't believe that this person is supposed to be my friend….and like, would not even care about my safety or my well-being.” Ivy was assaulted by a pastor, a person known to her who was also in a position of spiritual authority. While sexual abuse by religious authorities can lead to a loss of faith in God (McGraw et al., 2019), Ivy expressed that his role as a pastor made it more clear to her that his actions were wrong. She remembers thinking of the pastor, “Keep yourself pure, buddy.” In a feminist therapy framework, the impacts of the type relationship survivors had to the offender and how this can be explored and clients can explore how can they reclaim power in their relationships.

Feminist therapy also examines areas of social and interpersonal trauma by understanding ways that the trauma and experience of trauma was influenced by cultural norms and beliefs (Richmond et al., 2013). For women in this study, they completed this kind of work by looking at the victim-blaming narratives that led them to normalize the assault or blame themselves. This is further explained by Brown (2004) as she says, “repeated prior life experiences have lent added stigmatizing meaning to becoming the victim of this type of trauma” (p. 465). For a client in this population, this might mean looking at how they believed only women who were promiscuous were sexually assaulted, so the realization they were sexually assaulted may create feelings of shame or disgust in themselves since promiscuous women were judged as less valuable. This kind of examination of the ways that a client was disempowered and learning assertiveness skills can help her reclaim her power in the interpersonal and social-contextual spheres.

Spiritual and Existential Power

One of the areas that feminist trauma therapy examines for ways a client has been disempowered is "the existential/spiritual issues arising from the experience of trauma and assist clients in finding avenues for healing existential losses and dilemmas" (Brown, 2004, p. 469). This focus is particularly key for this population since experiencing sexual trauma can have significant impacts on existential and spiritual beliefs that center on a good God or just world (Ben-Ezra et al., 2010). Participants in the study shared how the experience of sexual assault impacted their beliefs about God, Christianity, and the world, with some participants becoming closer to Christianity and some moving farther away. A shifting in existential and spiritual beliefs has been noted in previous research, with a theory that this phenomenon "reflects the complex relationship between trauma, faith, and belief system change that is moderated by other personal, interpersonal, and environmental factors" (Ben-Ezra et al., 2010, p. 11). Because of this complexity, working with clients on how sexual assault has impacted their existential beliefs is an important element of treatment.

Therapists should strive to create a safe, non-judgemental space for clients to explore their shifting beliefs and to help clients identify ways they have been disempowered or ways they can increase the power they already have. If clients view their relationship with God as a source of power, the therapist can help explore ways the client can use this as a resource for healing from trauma. Conversely, if clients experienced a loss of spiritual power, such as a fear of God's punishment or distance from God, a therapist can help the client explore and reframe these beliefs so that they can reclaim the power they had in their spirituality, whether this means letting go of explicitly religious spirituality or reinterpreting their beliefs in a way that helps instead of harms them. In this way, therapy can provide a safe space for working through

changes in beliefs that may not be possible for an individual in a Christian community where shifting perspectives may be seen as a lack of faith.

Apparent for participants in the study was the significance of spirituality in their lives. For Katherine, her relationship with God was what saved her from completing suicide after intense abuse and pain in her life, including sexual assault. She shares, “So I was like, well, literally, God, I'm going to kill myself if you don't change things, if you're real, do something. And he did something. He did a few major somethings in that moment.” For Rachel, when she stepped away from her Catholic faith (only partly because of how sexual teachings impacted her after sexual assault), she felt profound loss and in coming back to her faith later found renewed meaning. She shares, “I realized that I was very, like, unhappy being away from the church and being like, not having a relationship with God, and when I, like, started praying and going back to church, I felt a lot better.” The three other participants in the study have distanced themselves from Christianity and have all found other spiritual perspectives that give them meaning in their lives. That sexual assault impacts spiritual and existential beliefs is no small matter – spirituality is a core part of being human and addressing this with survivors should not be an afterthought in treatment.

Limitations

While IPA provides an opportunity for rich analysis of a small number of participants’ experiences (Smith et al., 2012), there are limitations and criticisms that should be considered when evaluating the current study. One of the main criticisms of IPA is that the ability of the accuracy of the portrayal of the participant relies on the participant’s ability to describe their experience of the phenomenon and the researcher’s ability to understand and describe the phenomenon (Tuffour, 2017). As Tuffour (2017) describes, “the critical unanswered question is

whether both the participants and researchers have the requisite communication skills to successfully communicate the nuances of experiences" (p. 4). It is important to note in the study that some participants described their experiences with nuanced language, while others seemed to struggle to find the words they needed. While the researcher used clinical skills to help participants explore and express what they wanted in describing their experiences, it is possible that due to some participants' difficulty in expressing themselves (made more likely by the abnormal setting of an interview and the topic of a traumatic experience), their experiences were portrayed less accurately or less in depth than others in the study.

Studying the phenomenon of sexual assault, rather than a narrow type of sexual trauma, also is a limitation to the study. The study's use of a broad definition of sexual assault resulted in range of experiences from rape to a slap on the buttocks. This resulted in widely different perceptions of the event, impacts, and ways of healing. While this did provide the researcher with an opportunity to compare the experiences, it limited the results in the sense that only one or two participants experienced each type of assault.

Another limitation of the study is that the bias of the research may have unduly influenced the results. While qualitative research is always conducted through the lens of the researcher's cultural location and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), there can be greater risk that the researcher imposes their own ideas onto data when they have personal experience with the phenomenon being studied (Drake, 2009). In the current study, the researcher herself has experienced sexual assault and participated in communities where she learned Christian teachings about gender and sexuality. While her own experiences and the experiences of people around her were what sparked her interest in this topic and, as previously discussed, provided connections and knowledge that positively contributed to the completion of the study, her own

experiences may have coloured her interpretation of the data. To mitigate this, the researcher used a "cyclical approach" to bracketing, which involved reflecting on her own thoughts, feelings, and assumptions throughout the entire process (Smith et al., 2012). Despite this, it is possible that the results have been influenced by the researcher's experience and perspective.

Strengths

One of the strengths of the study was accepting participants from any Christian denomination. Previous qualitative studies around Christianity and sexual assault have limited the participants to participants from one denomination of Christianity, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Whiteley, 2019) or Evangelicalism (McKinzie & Richards, 2022). While there are merits to that approach, by opening the study to any Christian denomination, the similarities and differences across the participants could be examined. Strikingly, the study found many similar impacts of teachings on sexuality and gender despite differences in certain doctrines or presentations of the teachings.

Another strength of this study is the way the results are practically applied to recommendations for mental health practitioners. These recommendations are based on the findings interpreted by the researcher, and by the responses of the participants about what helped them heal. This ensures that the study fulfills its purpose of making positive change in mental health care for women survivors with a Christian background. By identifying specific topics that are salient for this population, it provides clinicians who may not have any religious background with insight into what may be impacting a client. Presenting these through the lens of feminist therapy is particularly valuable since feminist therapy addresses concerns of power and gender, themes that were woven throughout the participants' stories.

The use of IPA was a strength for this study. Smith et al. (2012) says, “One key area of IPA research is concerned with sex and sexuality” (p. 135), making it particularly fitting for the topic of sexual assault in the current study. In IPA, there is an emphasis on an inductive approach to research, which allows the researcher to listen to participants’ experiences without the lens of a hypothesis that may influence the results or interview process (Smith et al., 2012). This was particularly fitting for a study that examined the meaning-making of participants’ experiences of sexual trauma, since it prioritized the participants’ views on this sensitive topic.

Implications for Future Research

As with most research, the present study raised more questions and ideas than it provided answers. There are two main recommendations the researcher has for future research to be conducted. The first is that a similar study, exploring how Christian teachings on gender and sexuality impact the experience of sexual assault, should be conducted with men survivors of sexual assault. Because the current teaching found that the expectations around gender influenced the participants’ experience, it is postulated that the converse may be true for male survivors of sexual assault as well. For example, just as the expectation that women be passive and receptive created vulnerability around sexual assault for some participants, for a man the expectation that he be strong and assertive may lead to a different type of guilt and shame if he were to experience a “freeze” trauma response during a sexual assault. A study with men can then be compared with the results to the current study, thus creating room for comparing the two experiences.

The second recommendation for further research is that this phenomenon be narrowed further to studying the responses to disclosure from Christian communities and how this impacts someone’s relationship to Christianity. Participants in the study shared feeling isolated because

they did not disclose, and others faced rejection when they did. Because not all participants disclosed the assault to one or more members of their church, more breadth and depth is needed to understand the impact of a church's response. Future research can explore the reasons why someone chose to disclose an assault, and the psychological and spiritual impacts of the church's response.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand the experiences of women survivors of sexual assault and how they made meaning of their experience of sexual assault in light of Christian teachings of sexuality and gender. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the researcher identified the superordinate themes present in the participants' narratives and discussed the findings within a feminist framework. Finally, the researcher made recommendations for mental health practitioners about how to work with this population using a feminist therapy model.

It was an honour for the researcher to hear the stories of five women who chose to share a deeply vulnerable experience for the purpose of this study. It is the hope of the researcher that this work will provide therapists with insight and perspective to better work with clients who have similar experiences to that of the women in the study. Some of the participants expressed the same hopes, and others wish for the research to be seen by pastors, priests, or sex educators in Christian circles who can take the consequences of their words seriously, approaching sexual topics with kindness and respect, and addressing topics of sexual assault and consent to protect women even within an abstinence-based approach.

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Appendix A – Ethics Certificate

UNIVERSITÉ
SAINT-PAUL
UNIVERSITY

CERTIFICAT D'ÉTHIQUE
ETHICS CERTIFICATE

SPU-Ethics Certificate Number: 1360.8/25

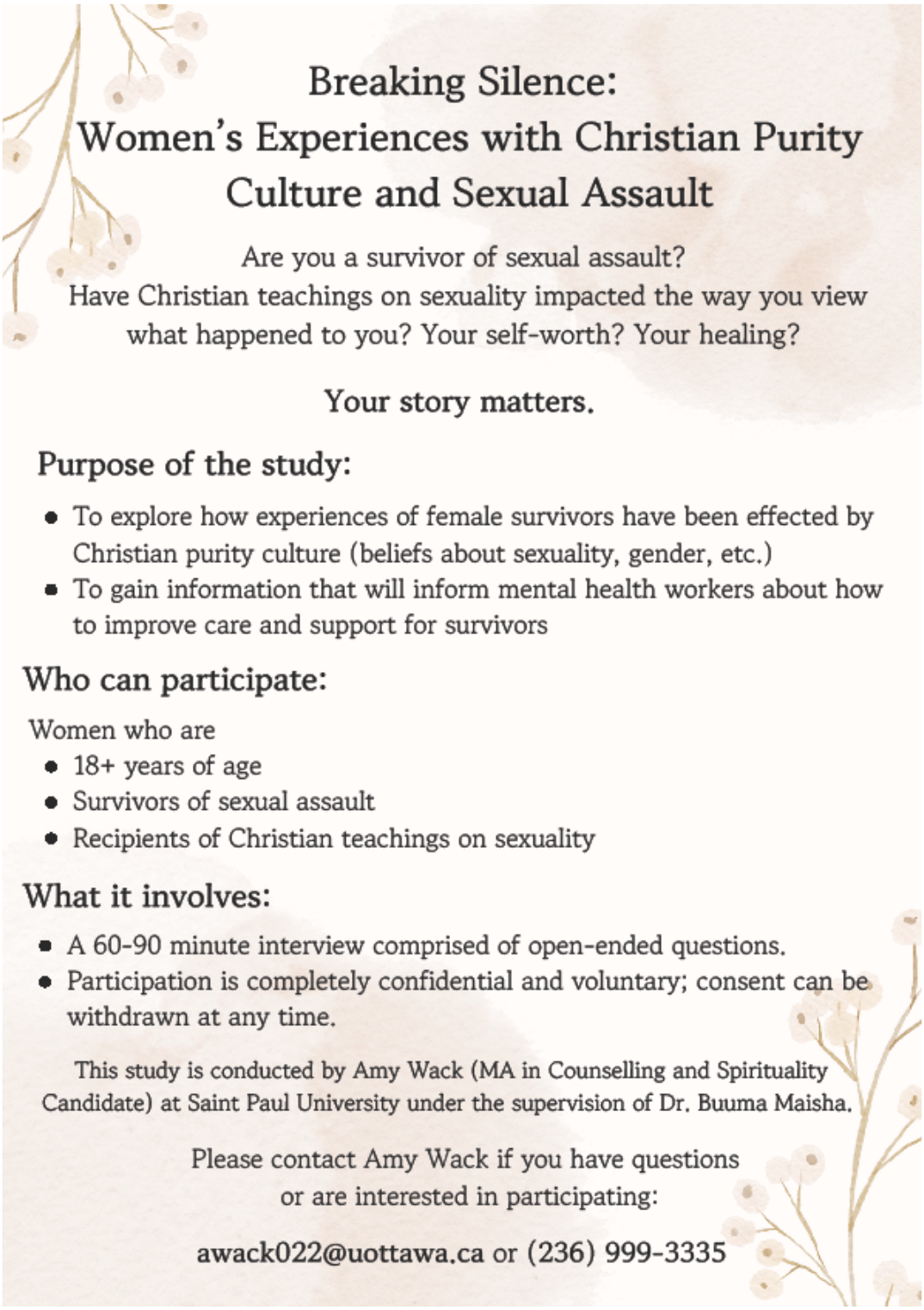
Student: Amy Wack
Student ID: 300192117

''Breaking Silence: Women's Experiences with Christian Purity Culture and Sexual Assault''
- M.A. Thesis -

June 20, 2025

Université Saint Paul University
223, Main Ottawa (Ontario) Canada K1S 1C4
Tel 613 236-1393 Fax 613 782-3005
ustpaul.ca

Appendix B – Recruitment Poster



Appendix C – Invitation to Participate

Invitation to Participate

Faculty of Human Sciences

Breaking Silence: Women's Experiences with Christian Purity Culture and Sexual Assault

Researcher: Amy Wack ([redacted])

Supervisor: Dr. Buuma Maisha ([redacted])

What is this study about?

You are being invited to participate in a study looking at your experiences regarding Christian purity culture and how it impacted your healing from sexual assault. This study seeks to explore the role of Christian teachings on the meaning of sexuality, gender, and sexual abuse, and how such meaning impacted women survivors' view of themselves, the abuse experienced, and their relationship to Christianity.

What will be expected of me and how much time will it take?

Participants will be expected to discuss their experiences of teachings about sexuality they received in a Christian context and their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the sexual abuse they experienced (not necessarily details about the abusive event[s] itself). Participants will be asked to engage in a one-on-one interview via videoconference with the researcher, where open-ended questions will be asked that will help the researcher understand their unique experiences. These interviews will take place for approximately 60-90 minutes via videoconference.

Will anyone know what I said or did?

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data collected will be protected by the use of pseudonyms in interviews and by changing any identifying information when reporting the data. Because interviews take place with a researcher, anonymity with the interviewer is not possible in the data gathering phase, but interviewees will remain anonymous in the analysis and

reporting of the findings. Data will be stored on a password protected computer, participant data files will additionally be password protected, and all data will be destroyed five years after the study's completion.

What happens if I want to withdraw?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time and for any reason. If you wish to withdraw, any data that has been collected will not be used and will be destroyed immediately. During the interview, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you do not feel comfortable.

What are the potential risks and benefits if I choose to participate?

There is medium risk to you by participating in this study, including possible emotional or psychological distress when discussing the experience of sexual assault. Potential benefits include giving a voice to women in this specific demographic regarding their experience of Christian teachings regarding their sexuality, and how these have impacted their experience as survivors of sexual assault. Your participation will enable further discourse and research surrounding the ways that female survivors are impacted by Christian purity culture.

Where do I get questions answered and how do I volunteer to participate?

If you have any questions regarding this research, or are interested in participating in this study, please contact Amy Wack via email at [redacted] or call [redacted] to arrange an interview. You may also contact Amy Wack's supervisor Dr. Buuma Maisha at [redacted] if you have any questions regarding the study.

Appendix D – Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Study title: Breaking Silence: Women's Experiences with Christian Purity Culture and Sexual Assault

Researchers:

Amy Wack

Lead Researcher, M.A candidate

Counselling, Psychotherapy & Spirituality

Saint Paul University

223 Main Street Ottawa, K1S 1C4

Phone: [redacted]

Email: [redacted]

Dr. Buuma Maisha

Thesis Supervisor, Faculty of Human Sciences

Counselling, Psychotherapy & Spirituality

Saint Paul University

223 Main Street Ottawa, K1S 1C4

Email: [redacted]

Invitation to Participate: I am being invited to participate in the current study titled, *Breaking Silence: Women's Experiences with Christian Purity Culture and Sexual Assault* by M.A candidate Amy Wack and supervised by Dr. Buuma Maisha as part of Ms. Wack's master's thesis.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to answer the question: What are the beliefs about gender and sexuality that you received from a Christian environment and how do they impact how you make meaning of and heal from sexual assault? This study seeks to explore the role of Christian teachings on the meaning of sexuality, gender, and sexual abuse, and how such meaning impacted women survivors' view of themselves, the abuse experienced, and their relationship to Christianity.

Participation: If I choose to participate in this study, I will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute one-on-one interview via videoconference, where the lead researcher Amy Wack will ask open-ended questions regarding my experience.

Risks: There is medium risk in participating in this study. The interview process and speaking about topics of sexual assault and Christian purity culture may cause discomfort or emotional distress. If this is the case, I may:

1. Stop the interview at any point.
2. Refuse to answer a question and skip to the next.
3. Ask the researcher any clarifying questions.
4. If the interview process has caused any emotional or psychological distress, I can debrief with the lead researcher who is a psychotherapist intern, and then be referred to Saint Paul University's Counselling Centre for psychotherapy services (613-782-3022) or to the Ottawa Distress Centre for immediate support (613-238-3311). If I am outside of the Ottawa area, I will be referred to the appropriate resources accessible to me, including Free Counselling Society Canada for psychotherapy services or to the Canada-wide Suicide Crisis Line (call or text 9-8-8) for immediate support.

Benefits: By participating in this study, I will help give a voice to women in this specific demographic regarding their experience of Christian teachings regarding their sexuality, and how these have impacted their experience as survivors of sexual assault. My participation will enable further discourse and research surrounding the ways that female survivors are impacted by Christian purity culture.

Confidentiality and anonymity: By participating in this study, I can be assured that all identifying information that I will share will remain strictly confidential. All data will be kept on a password protected computer, and it is encouraged that I use standard safety measures when corresponding via email by signing out of my account and closing my browser after use. It is important to understand that all information shared throughout this process will be used specifically for Ms. Wack's master's thesis, and that the results may be shared in other forms of literature or within a conference setting. However, again, all identifying information will remain anonymous.

Conservation of data: The data collected from this study such as transcripts, audio recordings and summaries from the interviews will be kept on a secure, password-protected computer and in a locked file on the Saint Paul University Campus. The information will be stored at SPU for the duration of the study and for five years following completion. After this point, the data from this study will be disposed of by erasing electronic data which includes audio recordings and all paper copies will be shredded.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate in this study and, if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I do decide to withdraw from the study at any point, I can be assured that my data will not be used and will be destroyed immediately.

Acceptance: I,_____ agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Amy Wack of the Faculty of Human Sciences, Counselling, Psychotherapy and Spirituality, at Saint Paul University which research is under the supervision of Dr. Buuma Maisha. If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Office of Research and Ethics, Saint Paul University, 223 Main Street, Ottawa, ON K1S 1C4
Tel.: (613) 236-1393

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	*Signature*	*Date*
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

Appendix E – Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Let's start with some basic information. How old are you?

What is your spiritual or religious background like?

Did you grow up in a Christian church, or if not, what led you to your involvement there?

What denomination of Christianity was it?

Are you currently involved in a Christian church?

Which denomination?

What were the teachings and conversations around gender roles?

How were the roles for men and women different?

What do you remember about the teachings and conversations around sexual purity?

How did those teachings and conversations differ between men and women?

What, if any, were discussions you can recall around sexual consent in a Christian context?

It isn't the intention of this research to go in depth into the details surrounding the actual event or events of abuse. At this point, I will ask some general questions, and as mentioned at the beginning of the interview, you are free to share or not share according to your comfort level.

At what age or ages did you experience sexual abuse?

What relationship was the abuser to you?

Was the abuse a single incident or ongoing, and if ongoing, for how long?

At the time, what did you think of what had happened?

If you didn't consider it abuse, how long after did that thinking change?

What sparked the change?

Did you tell anyone what had happened?

If so, who?

What was their response like?

If not, what led you to not share it?

How did the teachings around gender roles impact the way you thought about the assault?

How did the teachings around sexual purity impact the way that you thought about the assault?

How did the teachings around sexual purity and gender roles impact how you thought about yourself after the assault?

What is your relationship to Christianity like now?

How, if at all, did the sexual abuse impact your relationship with Christianity?

What has been helpful for you in your healing journey?

How do you see gender role teachings as helpful or unhelpful for female survivors?

How do you see sexual purity teachings as helpful or unhelpful for female survivors?

Is there anything we haven't discussed today that you would like to share about your experience?

I want to sincerely thank you for your participation in this study. I know it's not an easy topic to be so vulnerable about. Do you have any questions for me?