**Trauma Conference**

**Welcome & Introduction**

Good morning and welcome to this the second trauma conference hosted by the Highland Violence Against Women Partnership.

My name is Moira Paton and I’m a feminist and the manager of RASASH, Rape & Sexual Abuse Service Highland.

If this is the first you’ve heard of RASASH or want to know more about what we do, please check out our website – [www.rasash.org.uk](http://www.rasash.org.uk) or grab me at a break

Before we start, just to say remind everyone to be mindful about their own feelings of safety. If you need to, please don’t be shy about taking a break for a while and taking time to find whatever support you need.

The first trauma conference jointly organised by the VAW partnership and RASASH was in May 2015, and there have been a lot of developments, nationally and locally, since then. In many ways this is not before time, especially if we think about how prevalent exposure to trauma is in our culture. We know that not everyone who’s exposed to trauma is necessarily going to experience long term impacts, but survivors of sexual and other gender based violence have been telling us for decades about how their experiences of trauma have impacted on them, and we certainly know how widespread sexual and other forms of gender based violence are.

One significant development since the last conference is the national NHS Trauma Training Framework, which aims to support the planning & delivery of training for those (across the wider Scottish workforce) who come into contact with survivors of trauma. The framework highlights that survivors are at increased risk of health and social difficulties because of the direct and indirect consequences of their experience(s), and that survivors often have difficulties accessing services or maintaining access with services.

The Framework goes on to describe 4 levels of knowledge & skills required to support those impacted by trauma– the baseline being ‘Trauma Informed’ which describes the minimum level of knowledge and skills required by **everyone** in the Scottish workforce. Assuming all of us here today work (or volunteer) that means all of us. Many of you here today will be working in what the Framework describes as Trauma Skilled services and some of you are from Trauma Enhanced and Trauma Specialist services. But at a minimum it says we all need to be Trauma Informed.

One of the prompts behind arranging this conference was a discussion about what exactly it might mean in practice to be trauma informed, and about how the partnership might best contribute to the conversation about this.

As the Trauma Training Framework says, “There are many aspects of trauma informed care and practice that overlap with principles of good care more generally, including person centered and compassionate care”.

It goes on to say that “the application of trauma informed care builds on and adds to these principles by recognizing the specific ways in which the experience of trauma can negatively impact on people's experience of care, support and interventions”.

So the framework is saying:

Learn about how trauma can impact on people **and** think about the various aspects of your service or your approach that may be challenging for someone living with the impacts of interpersonal trauma.

There are lots of great resources and sources of ideas & support out there but it’s also crucial for us to bring our hearts & ourselves into this and really try to understand what it might mean for individuals – a little empathy goes a long way! It’s entirely different knowing in one’s head about how the brain works and what that might mean, and then actually really recognising and empathising with how it might feel to live daily with hypervigilance and flashbacks for example.

Most importantly of all though, we need to bear in mind that all of our service users are unique individuals and it’s their personal experience of our service that counts. Some survivors may not recognise that they’re experiencing the impacts of trauma and some won’t have a diagnosis of complex PTSD but they might nevertheless find accessing certain services extremely difficult.

We also need to remember that survivors have only survived because they have developed their own unique coping mechanisms. A really important point to bear in mind.

You really then need to ask the person in front of you….

Of course you all know this, it’s care 101 in many ways ………. ask the patient/client/service user. However, from feedback from survivors this seems to be something that many of us shy away from. Survivors tell us daily about feeling that people really don’t want to hear about their experiences of sexual violence or about the impacts this had has on them.

This often leaves survivors feeling worse – it exacerbates feelings of shame, self blame and isolation.

As we’ll explore later on this morning, this can have a profound impact on survivors.

I’m categorically not saying that we should all be asking all of our service users if they are survivors and looking for them to share their stories with us. That would be intrusive, unnecessary and in many cases damaging.

However, as I said, survivors tell us daily about how they feel shut down and have their experiences minimised, and we know that whilst many of us are quite relaxed about making detailed enquiries about very personal bodily functions, or very personal circumstances, we are not all so comfortable when someone mentions rape or sexual abuse.

This minimising and shutting down that survivors can face in service settings when they pluck up the courage to start to talk about their experiences reflects a wider societal response to rape and sexual violence.

Why should it be that survivors do have to ‘pluck up courage’?

Why do more of us not feel able to speak openly about sexual violence? To call out so called banter?

Largely, it’s because it doesn’t feel safe to do so. Why should we have to accept this?

Why as a society are we reluctant to really hear and respond to the impacts of endemic levels of sexual and other gender based violence?

Why did Kavanagh play out the way it did? What?

Why do surveys still show significant minorities of people believe there’s some justification, some irresistible provocation that excuses or somehow lessens the act of perpetrating sexual violence?

Why do many people insist on thinking, and sometimes saying, well if that had been me I’d have fought back or run away immediately/etc etc when the evidence is clear that our survival responses are outwith conscious control and that it’s impossible to predict how we’d respond to similar experiences?

Why are survivors so often asked ‘but why did you not report this immediately?’

Why is it that when allegations of sexual and other forms of gender based violence come forward, the motives, character and background of the victim are picked over and torn apart in a way that just doesn’t happen with victims of other crimes? Why is this the only time society wants to hear and question and pick apart the survivor’s story, when the survivor names the perpetrator and seeks justice?

Why is it that as a society we - in some ways - recognise how heinous a crime rape is – for example we have a really high legal bar for prosecution and are told often that we should be careful about what we’re saying as to accuse a man of rape will have a huge detrimental impact on his future, yet we shut down survivors, question their veracity and their responsibility or culpability?

Why is it that the fact that a man is more likely to be raped by another man than he is to be falsely accused of rape by a woman is a surprise to so many people?

I can still remember the feeling I had many decades ago when I first truly understood the phrase ‘the personal is political’ and, working with RASASH, that feeling returns daily. What happens to survivors is both very personal and very political.

The personal should be political when it comes to sexual violence, and the political, societial and cultural environment certainly impacts directly on the personal for survivors.

So I think that if we want to be truly trauma informed in the context of sexual and other forms of gender based violence, a fundamental first step is to open up these conversations. By working together and supporting each other we can help ourselves feel a bit safer doing so.

As workers in the public and third sectors I think we need to inform ourselves both about how trauma impacts on the brain, the body, the soul, the whole person, AND about how it impacts on our communities and on wider society.

Both as workers and as members of society, we need to talk about why the antecedents of interpersonal trauma are so common, about how we can become more comfortable and confident about really hearing a survivor’s story and their pain, about how we can make our services more accessible for survivors, AND about what we can do to change the conditions that allow gender based violence to be so endemic and survivors to so often be held responsible for the crimes perpetrated upon them.

That would make a huge difference to survivors and go a long way towards helping make our services more trauma informed.