



End Violence Against Women International
(EVAWI)

Should Sexual Assault Victims Be Interviewed by Female Officers and Detectives?

Kimberly Lonsway
Sergeant Joanne Archambault (Ret.)

February 2015
Updated December 2022

Public Domain Notice

Unless something is excerpted directly from a copyrighted source, all the material in this document is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without specifically requesting permission from End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) or the authors. Any direct quotes or excerpts should be properly cited, however. No one may reproduce or distribute this material *for a fee* without the specific, written authorization of End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI).

Electronic Access

The publication may be downloaded from End Violence Against Women International's [Resource Library](#).

Recommended Citation

Lonsway, K.A., Archambault, J., (2022). *Should Sexual Assault Victims Be Interviewed by Female Officers and Detectives?* End Violence Against Women International.



Authors

Dr. Kimberly A. Lonsway has served as the Director of Research for EVAWI since 2004. Her research focuses on sexual violence and the criminal justice and community response system. She has written over 60 published articles, book chapters, technical reports, government reports, and commissioned documents – in addition to numerous training modules, bulletins, and other resources. She has volunteered for over fifteen years as a victim advocate and in 2012, she was awarded the first–ever Volunteer of the Decade Award from the Sexual Assault Recovery and Prevention (SARP) Center in San Luis Obispo, CA. She earned her PhD in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign.



Sgt. Joanne Archambault (Retired, San Diego Police Department) is the Chief Executive Officer for EVAWI. In 2003 prior to founding EVAWI, Sgt. Archambault worked for the San Diego Police Department for almost 23 years, in a wide variety of assignments. During the last 10 years of her service, she supervised the Sex Crimes Unit, which had 13 detectives and was responsible for investigating approximately 1,000 felony sexual assaults each year. Sgt. Archambault has provided training for tens of thousands of practitioners, policymakers and others – both across the country and around the world. She has been instrumental in creating system–level change through individual contacts, as well as policy initiatives and recommendations for best practice.



We are frequently asked whether law enforcement agencies should have a policy of assigning female detectives to interview sexual assault victims, whenever possible. This question is certainly a legitimate one, because the vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by men, and some people believe that the presence of a male officer (especially one that is uniformed and armed) may be upsetting for some victims.

On the other hand, some victims have said that they felt safer and calmer in the presence of a male officer. Joanne Archambault relates her own personal experience with this dynamic while working at the San Diego Police Department:

Joanne worked with a male detective, as a colleague while working Child Abuse and then as his sergeant in Sex Crimes for a number of years. This detective is large in stature, both tall and muscular. He was also a former Marine Corps drill sergeant and a black belt in Karate, exuding masculinity. However, in her opinion, he was one of the best child abuse and sex crimes detectives she ever had the honor of working with. In addition to his outstanding investigative and report writing skills, the detective never appeared stressed, rushed, or impatient with anyone. He made all the victims he interviewed, feel that he had time for them and they were important. As the detective's supervisor, Joanne knows that the sense of peace and lack of stress that he projected was actually far from the truth. As one of only a few Spanish-speaking detectives in both Units (Child Abuse and Sex Crimes), his caseload was typically higher than those who did not speak Spanish. For example, Spanish speakers are often assigned more in-custody interviews on Monday morning following busy weekend activity. This detective also often had close to 100 open cases, not because he hadn't written up his follow-up investigations, but because he wouldn't let go of a case until he had pursued every possible lead and done the best job he could do. In reality, the detective's work and personal life was often extremely stressful, but he never let a victim feel that stress. This can either be a gift or a skill that might be difficult for many of us to learn.

Joanne states that she probably admired this skill in this particular detective even more because it doesn't come naturally to her at all. She states that she would have to work very hard to slow down and show the type of patience needed to successfully work with most sexual assault victims. Over the years, she learned techniques to help develop these skills, but it was difficult.

Many victims have said that it was important to come into contact with a compassionate man in the aftermath of the sexual assault. Also, by assuming that all victims of sexual assault will be more comfortable with a female officer, this minimizes the experiences of victims who were sexually assaulted by women.



There is therefore no clear answer regarding whether male or female officers (or deputies, or detectives) have an *automatic* advantage in this situation. What is absolutely clear is that an officer's competence and compassion are far more important than gender in determining their effectiveness at interviewing sexual assault victims. Clearly, both male and female officers can be successful, and **we recommend that all officers and investigators be trained on how to interview sexual assault victims.**

In this training bulletin, we explore some of the issues related to sexual assault and officer gender. We then conclude with some additional resources to assist in this area.

Training and Skill More Important than Gender

In fact, it isn't clear that many law enforcement agencies could realistically implement such a policy of assigning only female officers or deputies, even if they wanted to. Many agencies simply do not have enough female investigators to routinely assign them to sexual assault cases, and even if they did, the reality is that a female officer or deputy would not always be available to take the call.

There is also concern that some administrators may believe that by assigning a female officer or deputy this will automatically mean that victims of sexual assault are receiving a competent and compassionate law enforcement response. Yet without effective training, there is no reason to believe that female officers will be any more successful than male officers in investigating sexual assault.

It is therefore important not to assume that women will do a better job responding to sexual assault *simply because they are women*. In most cases, victims are able to feel when investigators are listening carefully and responding appropriately, regardless of their gender. Male and female officers can be equally effective.

The same is true for other professions. Just because a female prosecutor, nurse, physician, or advocate is assigned to work these cases, this does not ensure that victims are receiving an appropriate response. Victims will respond best to professionals who demonstrate competence and compassion, whatever their gender.

To help both male and female officers do their jobs effectively, law enforcement agencies must ensure that *all officers and investigators* receive training in sexual assault investigation. The same is true for other responding professionals. Training is needed for both men and women to address the unique issues they face when responding to sexual assault victims.

For Male Officers and Investigators

For male officers and investigators, we have already discussed how they may possess some immediate *advantages* in responding to a sexual assault victim – some victims feel

safer and calmer in the presence of a male officer, and others feel it is important to come into contact with a compassionate man in the aftermath of the sexual assault.

However, it is also important to recognize the unique *challenges* that male officers might face. For example, male officers can sometimes find it very difficult to identify with victims of sexual assault (who are typically female) because women's reality and behavior are often so different from men's.

It can be particularly challenging for men to make sense of victim behavior such as not resisting or reporting immediately, because women and men have very different scripts for socially acceptable behavior in sexual situations. Some male officers may even fear being falsely accused of rape, or at least identify with the threatening possibility. This may influence how they respond to sexual assault victims and cases.

For all of these reasons, male officers face unique challenges when responding to sexual assault cases involving female victims. Yet successful investigation requires that interviewing officers take the perspective of *victims* when seeking to understand the situation and their responses. This is ultimately much more important than the investigator's gender in determining success.

When the Victim is Male

Another issue for men may arise when a male victim reports a sexual assault. Some male victims may prefer working with female professionals (such as a female police officer, nurse, doctor, advocate, etc.), because they might feel that they do not have to "prove" their masculinity as much as they might with a male professional. Therefore, if a male officer is interviewing a male victim of sexual assault, this is another factor to consider while working to build rapport and communicate compassion. Male officers may have to work harder than their female counterparts to establish the necessary comfort level with male victims.

It is also important to keep in mind that most victim advocates are female, and their presence during the law enforcement interview can help to balance some of the challenges faced by male officers, deputies, and investigators.

For Female Officers and Investigators

As with their male colleagues, female officers and investigators have some immediate *advantages* when responding to a sexual assault victim (again, typically a female). For one thing, women are often more accustomed to talking about personal things with other women. This can make the interview easier, at least initially, but it also means that victims sometimes tolerate tougher questioning from female officers than male officers.



As with male officers, however, this initial advantage will disappear if the female officer demonstrates that she is in fact judgmental toward the victim or doubts the validity of the report. In fact, female officers often share with their male counterparts a *serious challenge* in understanding the behavior of sexual assault victims.

For example, female officers often have a heightened motivation to distance themselves from the threat of sexual victimization. As a result, women sometimes focus on reasons to blame the victim for the sexual assault. In other words, if women can convince themselves this victim somehow brought on the sexual assault by something she said or did, they can convince themselves that avoiding such behavior will guarantee that they will never be similarly assaulted.

Another potential barrier for female officers exists for those who have personally experienced sexual assault. By comparing other experiences with their own, female officers who have a history of sexual assault or abuse may sometimes perceive that a case does not represent a "real rape" like their own. Alternatively, female officers may not have been believed when they were sexually assaulted, or blamed for it, and again this may affect their reaction to victims.

Female officers must be aware of this motivation to distance themselves from sexual assault victimization and ensure that they communicate effectively and empathetically with victims. Again, competence and compassion are more important than gender in determining success.

What to Do About Investigator Gender

As a matter of policy, any victim who requests a female officer should be accommodated whenever possible. While this doesn't happen very often, it would be significant if the victim made such a request – so the best response would be to assign a female officer if possible.

However, victims who do not spontaneously request a female officer, deputy, or investigator should not be explicitly presented with that option. When a male officer asks a victim if he or she would prefer a female officer, this can be seen as rejection or an attempt to avoid handling the case. (In fact, this question *is* sometimes used by male officers to avoid investigating these cases.)

The bottom line is that male and female officers must *both* be trained to conduct a successful sexual assault investigation, based on best practice guidelines and their basic human compassion. Furthermore, most victim advocates are female, so this can serve to offset some of the negative effects of officer gender and maximize the unique *advantages* of male and female officers.

Forensic Interviewing Specialists

Whenever we raise the question of who should interview sexual assault victims, it is worth addressing the issue of forensic interviewing specialists. These professionals are typically social workers or other child abuse professionals who are trained to use specific skills and techniques for interviewing young children. For example, they will ask questions in a way that can be understood by a person with limited cognitive abilities and experience, by using concrete language and avoiding leading questions. They will also typically be trained to use tools such as drawings and anatomically correct dolls if this will help the victim communicate more effectively.

Many law enforcement agencies have a protocol specifying that victims under a certain age (e.g., 14) will be interviewed by a forensic interviewing specialist rather than a police officer or investigator. This is a recommended practice, and in fact a forensic interviewing specialist should be used anytime it will best serve the needs of victims (e.g., when the victim has a severe disability affecting cognition or communication). However, we do not recommend a practice of using a forensic interviewing specialist to interview all adolescent victims of sexual assault – let alone all adults.

Some people have expressed concerns regarding the ability of law enforcement to successfully interview sexual assault victims, and this has been recommended as a potential solution. Yet there are very serious concerns with the possibility of excluding law enforcement from the interview process. One is that this practice puts the entire investigation on hold until the forensic interview can be conducted. This is typically appropriate for young children – both because of the challenges associated with interviewing them effectively but also because their abuse has often been going on for years and they are frequently taken into protective custody while the investigation proceeds. For the majority of adolescent and adult victims, however, this practice is not justified. Moreover, it can prevent law enforcement from meeting a number of critical objectives that must happen within a short time of receiving the report, including:

- Determining what crime is being reported
- Locating where the crime occurred
- Establishing where the crime scene(s) or evidence might be
- Evaluating whether there are witnesses

Law enforcement must also identify who the suspect(s) might be and then strategize the best method of approach (e.g., by conducting a non-custodial interview, placing a pretext phone call, or executing a search warrant). These tasks require law enforcement to conduct a preliminary interview with the victim as soon as possible.



Even when victim interviews are conducted using forensic interviewing specialists, law enforcement investigators will often need to have follow-up conversations with victims as the investigation moves forward and evidence is analyzed. In fact, a sexual assault investigation will not typically advance unless the law enforcement investigator is able to establish rapport and trust with the victim. Instead of trying to exclude law enforcement from the interview process, we must therefore ensure that they have the tools and resources they need to do their jobs right – and then hold them accountable for their performance – all while collaborating with multidisciplinary partners to best serve the needs of victims and the interests of justice in sexual assault cases.

For More Information

For more details on how to conduct a successful interview with a victim of sexual assault, please see the OLT module entitled, [Effective Victim Interviewing: Helping Victims Retrieve and Disclose Memories of Sexual Assault](#). A variety of webinars and training bulletins are also archived on our website.

For example, we offer [webinars](#) on the following topics:

- [Trauma Informed Interviewing – Turning Understanding into Outcomes](#)
- [Neurobiology of Sexual Assault – Part 1: Experience and Behavior](#)
- [Neurobiology of Sexual Assault – Part 2: Experience and Memory](#)
- [Effective Victim Interviewing](#)

Training bulletins address issues such as:

- [Understanding the Neurobiology of Trauma and Implications for Interviewing Victims](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Interviewing and the Criminal Sexual Assault Case: Where Investigative Technique Meets Evidentiary Value](#)
- [Becoming Trauma Informed: Learning and Appropriately Applying the Neurobiology of Trauma to Victim Interviews](#)

