

A Systematic Review of Sexual Assault Referral Centers (SARC)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual violence against women is a commonly prevalent human rights violation and a widespread public health problem. It is associated with substantial short and long-term ill consequences for women and their families. As the response of the community is increasing day by day to sexual assault, new interventions have evolved in the form of sexual assault centers. These centers are community-based organizations that work to counteract the potential negative impacts of sexual assaults on the physical, mental, and psychological health of the victims.

Objective: The objective of the study is to find out the multi-disciplinary professional services provided by these centers globally to treat sexual assault victims.

Methods: The information is collected from secondary sources. This systematic review was prepared according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. Online databases were searched including, Research Gate, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online Library, Scopus, and Google Scholar, and the search included the term 'sexual assault centers, rape crisis centers, integrated services at sexual assault centers'.

Results: The important post-assault services provided by these centers include medical treatment, forensic examination, police services, and psychological counseling to the sufferers of the tragic event. In addition, these centers are also involved in carrying out significant research and educational work.

Practical Implication: These rape crisis centers are providing multidisciplinary services to rape victims including services of specially trained nurses, treatment and care of medical injuries, forensic medical examination, police services, counseling by psychologists and a highly organized follow-up.

Conclusion: These centers are providing valuable multidisciplinary services including medical treatment, forensic examination, police services, and psychological counseling to the sufferers of sexual abuse under one roof. The understanding of these multidisciplinary services could be used to endorse the development of sexual assault centers in different parts of the world

Keywords: Sexual assault, sexual assault centers, multidisciplinary services

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a pervasive social problem. The incidence of sexual violence against women is increasing globally day by day. It is estimated that worldwide, one in five women will become a victim of rape in her lifetime time¹. This number is not the true reflection of the whole story as it is not disclosing the physical, emotional, and psychological scars that a victim can carry for the rest of their life. The public has recognized the deleterious consequences linked with rape for the last few decades³¹. Rape is one of the most lethal traumatic events causing a variety of long-term negative effects including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance abuse, and suicidality².

The harmful effects of rape, that a victim undergoes, were first described by two researchers Burgess and Holmstrom (1974). They collectively placed these drastic outcomes under the term "Rape Trauma Syndrome". The afterward research work on the issue has also established the close association of these post-assault effects to rape. Indeed rape has now been well-known as a traumatic event³

The first rape crisis center was formed in the USA in early 1970 due to the anti-rape movement which was a result of the civil rights and feminist movement which resulted in increased awareness regarding sexual violence, implementation of different services for survivors in the country^{4,5}. The main objective of these centers was to reduce the incidence of rape and promote safe legislative measures providing rape victims more rights and protection⁶. These centers were carrying a mission towards social change.⁷

The victims of rape are in dire need of multiple social systems for post-assault recovery. It has been observed that a significant number of patients do not report the assault to the police because of the victim's desire to maintain privacy. Moreover the issues like being blamed by others and the names being highlighted by the news media also makes them reluctant to report the incidence. Among the victims of sexual assault nearly 26% to 40% cases approaching to the sexual assault centers in United States seek justice through medico legal system after reporting assault, avail medical treatment and undergo forensic examination

^{8,9}These much needed integrated services included medical treatment, forensic examination, police services and psychological counseling, helpvictims towards speedy recovery.¹⁰

Rape crisis center providing multidisciplinary services has been in operation in the San Diego, USA since 1991 in the form of (SART) San Diego County Sexual Assault Response Team consisting of trained nurse, medical expert, law enforcement officer and victim's advocate¹¹

These interventions in the form of provisions of various services from different disciplines in a coordinated manner including the forensic examination by trained staff and psychological counseling with legal assistance by law personals was the prime motive for establishing these rape crisis centers in Nordic countries. The first center providing these services was formed in Norway in 1986.¹² On the above guidelines following these models these centers are also established in other parts like in Iceland in 1993 and Denmark (city of Aarhus) in 1999¹³

In Netherlands, keeping in view the multifold advantages associated with providing multidisciplinary integrated services to victims of sexual assault, the rape crisis center was established in 2012¹⁴

MATERIALS & METHODS

This systematic review was prepared according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis³⁰.

Search strategy: Online data bases were searched including Walters's Kluwer, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Online Library, Scopus, and Google Scholar by searching the term 'Sexual Assault Center, rape crisis center, multidisciplinary services, integrated services at rape crisis centers.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: Seventy articles were screened, and forty articles were selected after removing the duplicates. Among 40 articles 20 yielded from google scholar, 10 from Wiley Online Library, 06 from Taylor & Francis and 04 from Walters's Kluwer, At the end ten most relevant articles were opted for full-text assessment. These articles were focused upon the provision of integrated services including the psychological treatments to the sufferers of sexual abuse under one roof. The

articles emphasizing only upon the medico legal examinations were excluded.^{30,31}

Research assistants helped in reviewing the articles and finally ten articles met the inclusion criteria

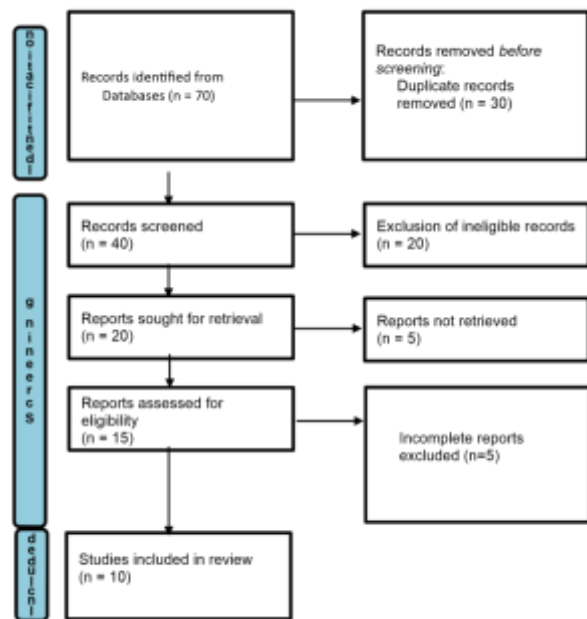


Figure 1: PRISMA chart of reviewed studies^{30,31}

Table.1: The mentioned below table indicates the author, publication year, and major findings:

Author	Year	Method	Findings/ services
Lomax	2022	Qualitative	Psychological interventions in the form of counseling provided to victims of sexual assault can significantly improve post-assault mental trauma.
Peeters et al	2019	Cross sectional	The services of different disciplines provided at sexual assault centers enhance the speedy recovery of victims
Miyamoto et al	2021	programed logic model	Forensic examination of victims with interdisciplinary approach at telehealth center
Schmitt et al	2017	Qualitative (interview based)	Meaningful and effective role of sexual assault nurse examiners in multidisciplinary approach in criminal prosecutions .
Quinlan et al	2016	Review	Considerable research and educational work as an important constituent of integrated services
Bicanic et al	2014	Prospective study	Integrated services include the medico legal examination and counselling to rape victims in Netherlands
Dawnay et al	2023	Review	Forensic examination including DNA typing and other multidisciplinary services in collaboration with agencies
Greeson et al	2013	Review	Discusses the role of sexual assault nurse examiner at these centers regarding the collection and preservation of biological evidence.
Nöthling et al	2022	Cross sectional	Individual and group counseling of the victims, in the early phase after the assault an important aspect of integrated services at have a positive impact on mental health
Bramsen et al	2009	Experiences of a public Danish center for rape victims	Integrated services provided at Danish assault center consisted of forensic examination and post event counselling

Police services: Police department is well aware of the centers and services offered. The concerned police officers are specially trained for interviewing the victims. In standard settings, as it is operational at the Danish assault center, if a victim of assault calls the police, the police after a brief questioning start the investigation and takes the victim to the rape crisis center. In another scenario, if a victim wants to report the incidence the nurse on duty calls the police¹⁷. The police conduct an initial inquiry in the presence of a nurse. In case of any physical evidence, the evidence is collected and stored until possible trial is over. The police also have legal duty to inform the victim about recovering the monetary compensations¹⁸

Medical services including forensic examination: The important essential medical services required by the victims after assault include detection and treatment of any physical injury, forensic medical examination, screening for sexually transmitted infections and treatment, pregnancy testing and providing

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The various essential post-assault services provided by these centers include medical care of the victim, medicolegal examination, police services, and psychological counseling to the sufferers of the tragic event. Moreover, these centers are also involved in carrying out significant research and educational work. In the centers, the medico-legal examination of the victim is carried out by using specialized kits for evidence collection by trained forensic nurse examiners. These centers are also involved in facilitating the victims in their post-assault recovery from psychological trauma through psychological counseling from experts. In addition these centers are significantly contributing in substantial research activities and promoting awareness among masses. The important services are highlighted in Tab. 1

Post assault services provided at rape crisis centers: The important post assault multidisciplinary services provided at these centers include medical, forensic and psychological services. In addition these centers are also carrying out significant research and educational activities. The motive behind these centers is to provide the services of relevant professionals in one place to facilitate the recovery of victims towards normal and to avoid revictimization^{15,16,33}

Most of these centers are located in the emergency rooms of the regional hospitals and are providing multidisciplinary integrated services including medical care and treatment, forensic examination, individual or group counseling by psychologist and a highly organized follow up procedure. These centers are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week serving the victims of sexual assault. Following is the brief description of the effective components of a multidisciplinary interventional approach.

emergency contraceptive measures. The evidence collected may include the plucked pubic hairs, loose hairs after combing the head and pubic area, vaginal, rectal, oral swabs for detection of semen. In addition finger nail scrapings and blood samples may also be collected for DNA and toxicological analysis^{19,20}

According to recommendations of The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2002) ,the victims of sexual assault should receive sexually transmitted diseases prophylaxis along with HIV prophylaxis²²

More recent advancement as for as the forensic examination and collection of evidence is concerned is the development of Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) programs in different parts of the world that is rapidly spreading in numbers during the last few decades. Most of these programs utilize highly specialized forensic equipment helping them in the collection of evidence and in the proper evaluation of physical injuries.²³

Post assault pregnancy services are also provided at these centers to rape victims.²⁴ According to The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists emergency contraception is recommended for victims who are at risk for pregnancy. Interestingly among the victims of assault who are in need of emergency contraception only 21% to 43% of victims actually receive it.²⁵

The mental health services: The victims of rape suffer from a wide range of mental health problems. The mental health effects of rape revealed rape as a devastating shock, resulting in significant destruction of their capacity to maintain a sense of personal safety, to recognize their individuality and sense of being invulnerable, and is a threat to many beliefs of the victim about themselves and world around them.²⁶ Psychological interventions in the form of counseling provided to victims of sexual assault can significantly improve post-assault mental trauma.^{28,32}

Rape crisis centers are the settings helping victims manage their contact with medical and legal systems. These centers are involved in providing mental health services through individual and group counseling.²⁷

Research and educational activities: These crisis centers are carrying out considerable research and educational work (that has produced a lot of awareness regarding the understanding of sexual assault from many different perspectives).^{21, 29}

Advantages: These rape crisis centers are providing multidisciplinary services to rape victims including services of specially trained nurses, treatment and care of medical injuries, forensic medical examination, police services, counseling by psychologists and a highly organized follow-up.

Conclusion and recommendations: Keeping in view the beneficial effects of this multidisciplinary approach involving the coordination between different disciplines in providing integrated services to rape victims, these centers could be used as an initiative to establish these organizations in different parts of the world, especially in low and middle-income countries.

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