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**Abstract** | This study explores restorative justice (RJ) approaches to sexual violence in the Australian Capital Territory through interviews with 35 stakeholders across justice, education, community and institutional sectors.

Research shows formal RJ processes operating alongside informal practices, particularly in educational and community settings, with practitioners innovating to support survivor needs. While institutional barriers, such as risk aversion and limited resources, restrict broader implementation, there is growing recognition of the value of RJ.

The study highlights the importance of survivor agency, trauma-informed practice and cultural safety. The findings demonstrate how RJ bridges violence prevention and response, with implications for policy and practice development.

## Restorative justice and sexual violence: Expanding possibilities and practice

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In March 2025, the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) delivered a report on justice responses to sexual violence, noting that ‘the justice system is failing to meet the twin goals of access to justice and accountability’ (ALRC 2025: 106). The ALRC made eight recommendations about restorative justice (RJ), including the need for legislation to make RJ for sexual violence widely available, to clarify that RJ is available in various circumstances—including when cases are not reported to the police—and to adequately resource and support RJ services.

Our research on RJ approaches to sexual violence in the Australian Capital Territory complements these recommendations.



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## Background

Sexual violence is pervasive in Australia, with approximately 14 percent of Australian adults (2.8 million) experiencing sexual violence since the age of 15 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). Young Australians are particularly vulnerable, with 58 percent of all recorded instances of sexual assault involving a survivor under the age of 18 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2025).

Few sexual violence survivors seek formal justice—92 percent of sexual assault victims did not report the most recent incident to police (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). Those who engage with the criminal legal system (CLS) often find it retraumatising (see ALRC 2025).

Given these limitations, our research explores RJ as an additional pathway that may satisfy some survivors' justice and recovery needs—or the needs of others impacted. RJ focuses on the harm that occurred, its impact and what those impacted feel needs to happen to move forward. It may involve a facilitated conversation between those who have caused harm, those who have experienced harm, their respective support networks and the broader community, to generate acknowledgement, accountability and repair (Daly 2016; Marshall 1999). This mechanism provides a safer space where survivors can give voice to the impacts of harm, have input into resolution and receive validation (Daly 2017; McGlynn & Westmarland 2019). Increasingly, the process is underpinned by trauma-informed practices that recognise survivors' need for safety, choice and empowerment (Jülich & Thorburn 2017; Pali & Madsen 2011; Pycroft & Christen-Schneider 2021).

Although feminist and other victim advocates have expressed concerns over the use of RJ in cases of sexual violence, its safety and usefulness have been increasingly accepted. Nevertheless, some scholars have raised concerns about compromising survivors' safety, failing to address entrenched patterns of violence (Daly & Stubbs 2006; Gavrielides 2007), minimising the seriousness of sexual violence (Hudson 2006; Lewis, Dobash & Cavanagh 2001), perpetuating power imbalances and inadequately holding perpetrators accountable (Coker 2002). Recent decades have seen more scholarship highlighting potential benefits of RJ for survivors of sexual violence (ALRC 2025; Rossner & Forsyth 2021).

In our full report (Rossner et al. 2026) we identify four key drivers of this shift: the limitations of the CLS, the growing evidence base for the use of RJ for sexual violence, the rise of 'people-centred justice' and evolution in feminist thought.

Against this background, the present project explored the current and potential practice of RJ to meet the justice needs of sexual violence survivors in the Australian Capital Territory. We adopted an expansive concept of RJ, recognising that it may work alongside, or separately from, the CLS in communities, workplaces, educational institutions and elsewhere.

## The ACT context

The Australian Capital Territory is celebrated in the global RJ community for its leadership and innovations (Sherman et al. 2015). It was well placed to provide an initial evidence base to influence practice and policy throughout Australia.

RJ has been part of the ACT justice system since 1994 and currently operates under the *Crimes (Restorative Justice) Act 2004* (ACT) (the Act). The Act established a framework for the phased introduction of RJ practices, reflecting a careful, evidence-informed approach to extending RJ progressively to more serious offences and from juveniles to adults. In 2018, the program was further expanded to include family and domestic violence and sexual violence offences.

The program is delivered by the Restorative Justice Unit, part of the ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate. The development of restorative approaches in a range of other contexts, including health care, education and coronial reform, is also central to the ACT Government's commitment for Canberra to become a 'Restorative City' (ACT Government 2025).

The Australian Capital Territory has also seen several significant developments in issues of sexual violence. Most notable is a high-profile incident at Parliament House in 2019, in which staffer Bruce Lehrmann was alleged to have sexually assaulted another staffer, Brittany Higgins. The incident prompted extensive legal and administrative action and is still the subject of legal dispute. However, in 2024, Justice Michael Lee determined to a civil standard that 'Mr Lehrmann raped Ms Higgins' (*Lehrmann v Network Ten Pty Limited* (2024) FCA 369: [620]).

In addition, the rates of sexual abuse at the Australian National University are much higher than at other Australian university campuses (see, for example, City News 2022).

In 2021, the ACT Government announced a Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Reform Program. At its launch, the ACT Victims of Crime Commissioner noted: 'We cannot continue to hold up the criminal justice system as the ideal justice response for survivors because that is a promise we simply cannot fulfill' (ACT Government 2021b: np). The program recommended the government 'research and pilot additional mechanisms to hold perpetrators to account including by expanding restorative justice processes for victim survivors' (ACT Government 2021a: 7) In 2022, the government indicated that it agreed in principle with this recommendation, acknowledging that:

... currently there are limited pathways open to victim survivors that are timely and responsive and facilitate accountability for perpetrators in a formal setting without having to engage with the criminal justice system. The ACT Government agrees to further research and to consider expanding restorative justice processes for victim survivors in relation to this recommendation. (ACT Government 2022: 10)

Our research contributes to this evidence base. Specifically, this paper explores alternative pathways and examines whether there is appetite for an expansive vision of RJ that is not dependent on CLS engagement.

## Method

Our research documented practices around survivor-centred RJ, in response to sexual violence in the Australian Capital Territory. We conducted 30 qualitative interviews with 35 relevant stakeholders who, in a professional capacity, support victim-survivors of sexual violence across criminal justice, community and institutional spaces. Purposive sampling was adopted, with stakeholders from:

- universities and other educational institutions ( $n=11$ );
- community organisations and support services that work with sexual violence survivors ( $n=11$ );
- justice professionals ( $n=9$ );
- faith-based organisations ( $n=2$ ); and
- health providers ( $n=2$ ).

Many participants across these sectors work extensively with First Nations communities, and one person identified as First Nations. We actively sought interviews with representatives from First Nations community controlled organisations but were unable to secure these interviews, despite multiple attempts. This represents an acknowledged limitation in our sample.

We did not engage with sexual violence survivors for this phase of the research, given the complex ethical considerations and approval processes involved in research with vulnerable populations.

Semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes) explored participants' experiences with current justice responses to sexual violence and perspectives on expanding restorative justice access. The interview guide covered: organisational roles, current services and pathways, unmet needs, community roles in responding to sexual violence, experiences with restorative approaches, and barriers to and opportunities for expansion. Questions were tailored to professional expertise—justice professionals discussed referral pathways, community providers focused on client needs, and those working with First Nations people addressed cultural considerations and community-based approaches. All participants were asked about their understanding of, and experiences with, RJ (defined broadly as healing-focused approaches using facilitated dialogue).

With permission, interviews were audio-recorded and stored securely. Interviews were professionally transcribed and then coded and analysed thematically. Although the research team performed all data collection, coding and analysis without algorithmic assistance, we selectively employed generative artificial intelligence to assist with organising our research findings, outlining report sections and drafting preliminary text, based on our analytical frameworks. These drafts were then substantially revised, verified and refined by the research team.

This project has ethical approval from the Australian National University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

## Limitations

Our methodology involved widespread enquiry into the existence of RJ practices that were operating ‘under the radar’. We made these enquiries through our networks in community, government, civil society and educational institutions. We also sent letters to organisations we surmised may have relevant experiences. We had expected to find many examples, but we located only a handful. A limitation of our methodology is that many survivors and their supporters were undoubtedly wary about academic outsiders entering into highly sensitive and potentially contestable terrain. We hypothesise that there is more practice going on than we were able to document, given the inherent challenges of researching informal, community-based practices that may not be widely publicised or formally recognised and the likelihood that practitioners operating ‘under the radar’ would be cautious about external scrutiny of their sensitive work with sexual violence survivors (O’Nolan, Zinsstag & Keenan 2018).

## Results

The ACT’s Restorative Justice Unit already provides a pathway to RJ for sexual violence, but uptake remains low. Recent research found a ‘relatively low proportion of referrals for sexual assault offences’ and noted that ‘Some stakeholders contextualised their hesitancy to refer sexual violence matters, saying that many sexual offenders would be unsuitable because they were unlikely to plead guilty’ (Lawler 2025: 8).

Despite these concerns, our research revealed substantial interest in, and emerging practices of, alternative pathways that operate outside formal legal processes. These ‘ground up’ or community-based approaches often appeared to develop organically, in response to unmet needs, particularly where conventional systems fail to address the complex justice needs of those affected by sexual harm.

### Existing alternative pathways

We identified various alternative pathways to RJ for sexual violence survivors across the Australian Capital Territory, although they are limited in scale, visibility and accessibility. These pathways include use of community-based services, faith-based initiatives and educational institution processes. Although the restorative approaches provided differed in their structures and specific implementations, they shared common elements: they operated primarily outside formal legal mechanisms, prioritised survivor voice and choice and sought to address the impacts of harm in ways that conventional justice processes often cannot. In what follows, we provide two detailed examples of such approaches—based in the community and in a university setting, respectively—that illustrate these broader patterns.

### *Community-based approaches*

One example involved a community-facilitated restorative conference addressing a sexual incident between two young people. This community-initiated process arose ad hoc, at the request of the young people's families, rather than through an existing community organisation. It was facilitated by a trained restorative practitioner working independently, completely outside of any formal justice system. The process engaged both young people and their families, addressing complex emotional dynamics, broken trust and a sense of harm and betrayal. According to the facilitator:

Part of the circle had to be the restoring between the two people who were involved in the act itself, but there were a lot of other people who felt that they were the victims of it as well. And so you had six people in the room, all of whom were hurting.

The conference took place within days of the incident, responding to concerns that, if not addressed quickly, the incident would escalate into a larger conflict within the close community the families were part of. The facilitator described the complex emotional dynamics that extended beyond just the primary people involved:

In the circle itself, the anger was useful, because it enabled the ... young people to hear what the impact [was] of the various ways they'd broken family rules and shown disrespect to each other, but also to each other's families. They'd been family friends for a long time, both families, and so everyone felt let down by everyone.

This facilitated dialogue provided a space for all affected parties to express their feelings and the impacts of what had happened. The process led to acknowledgement and a genuine exchange between the young people, with both expressing regret about how events had unfolded. However, the facilitator noted that, while the conference was successful, its rushed nature was not ideal:

I think it could have done with a couple of weeks of them cooling and reflecting. There was still some shock in there, being six days after the event.

This case illustrates how community-based restorative approaches can respond quickly to sexual harm incidents, engage multiple affected parties and create opportunities for accountability and repair that might not be available through formal justice processes. It also highlights the need for appropriate preparation time.

### *University-based restorative processes*

Universities and other educational institutions have been important sites for developing alternative pathways to addressing sexual violence (Karp et al. 2016). One university staff member explained that the close interconnection of student life creates both unique challenges and opportunities for restorative approaches:

They socialise together, they study together, they do their pracs together, they often go play inter-sport together and, in these close-knit environments, certain problematic cultures can develop, especially around drinking, culture around toxic or misogynistic views around women form, [it's] an environment where it becomes permissible for somebody to use violence against somebody else.

One university practitioner we interviewed had an extensive background in sexual violence response and prevention. The practitioner described facilitating restorative processes addressing sexual harm at an Australian university. This practitioner had worked with several young women who had experienced sexual harm but were seeking alternatives to formal disciplinary or legal processes:

I had this constant stream of people going ‘I’m harmed and I don’t think the person who did it knows. Like, it was okay to a point, and then it wasn’t, and I, as a survivor, don’t want to call it sexual assault ... but what I am going to say is it wasn’t wanted, or it wasn’t quite right ... It didn’t feel like I was considered in that in any way.’

These situations involved complex dynamics including alcohol, confusion about consent and ongoing social connections, making conventional punitive responses undesirable for many survivors. The practitioner initially focused on immediate safety and wellbeing before exploring accountability options, which often emerged naturally when survivors expressed wishes, such as: ‘I just want to keep talking here, but I want what I said here to somehow be heard by them.’ The long-term impact of these restorative processes appeared significant in the cases the practitioner tracked, noting that all completed their studies and participated in campus activities as desired: ‘Their life trajectory didn’t get diverted.’ This contrasted with observations that many students going through formal disciplinary processes ‘diverted their studies and left’ the university. The practitioner also emphasised authenticity and flexibility over rigid, formulaic restorative approaches.

Student advocates expressed particular interest in alternative approaches to addressing sexual harm on campus. This advocacy often emerged from personal experience with the limitations of conventional disciplinary processes:

And [we] were always looking for options that wasn’t the formal reporting process ... It was, like, trying to find any other community-based option or avenue.

These examples illustrate how restorative approaches can be implemented in institutional settings to address sexual harm in ways that centre survivor agency and control, while sometimes holding those who cause harm accountable. They demonstrate the importance of careful assessment, preparation and flexibility in response to each unique situation.

## **Appetite for an expansive vision**

A consistent theme was the relative fragility and isolated nature of existing restorative practices. All lacked firm authorising environments or communities of practice, making them dependent on individual facilitators, hard for survivors to find and vulnerable to external challenges.

Nevertheless, our research revealed significant appetite for an expansive vision of RJ that extends beyond the CLS. Many interviewees recognised the value of both formal, legislatively supported RJ programs and more flexible, community-based approaches. Rather than seeing these as competing models, they suggested complementary roles that could meet different needs and operate at different stages of survivors’ journeys.

### *Support for victim-centred approaches with greater flexibility*

Stakeholders expressed support for more victim-centred approaches that offer greater flexibility than conventional legal processes. This was particularly evident in discussions about what survivors actually want following sexual harm. A community sector interviewee told us:

What I have heard, time and time again, from a victim perspective, [is] they don't want the perpetrator to go to jail. They don't want a massive police involvement. They want an acknowledgement and an apology. That's it.

This focus on flexible, survivor-centred approaches was seen as particularly important, given the trauma that formal legal processes can cause. Recalling cases of sexual violence in the university, one university professional remarked:

Two cases that I can think of that went to court, where the person in both cases needed to withdraw ... because their studies were so impacted by their experience going through the court process ... They didn't get substantiated. I think in one, I think the case was going to go to retrial, but the person's mental health was very, very damaged.

### **Addressing justice gaps with RJ**

Our research identified several specific needs that RJ could address that are not currently met by existing formal systems. These needs reflect gaps in conventional legal system responses and highlight areas where RJ could offer particular value.

### *Alternative pathways for accountability*

Many stakeholders identified a need for pathways that can provide accountability, without the negative consequences that often deter reporting or engagement with formal systems. This was particularly evident in discussions about complex sexual violence cases involving misunderstandings, alcohol or unclear communication.

In educational settings, this need for an accountability process without corresponding formal sanctions was often linked to maintaining community connections. A university professional noted that the survivors are often hesitant to pursue disciplinary action because they:

... don't want [perpetrators] out of the college, because they're really popular, and they're part of [their] friend group, so therefore I'm not going to have friends. They want some action, but not necessarily a punitive action of a misconduct ... they just didn't want to go through ... causing somebody's career to be damaged.

### *Discussions around consent and impact*

Stakeholders identified a significant need for spaces where issues of consent and the impact of non-consensual sexual interactions can be discussed and clarified. This was seen as particularly valuable in cases involving ambiguous communication or misunderstood boundaries. This is a gap that a process such as restorative dialogue could fill.

Many interviewees observed situations where there appeared to be genuine confusion about whether harm had occurred. For example, a university professional said:

Often you would have young women come and say ‘I don’t know if he knows what he did was wrong. He’s hurt me, but actually the day after he sent me a text saying “Hey, I’m going to the café, do you want me to pick you up a coffee?”’

Police professionals similarly recognised the potential value of RJ in addressing consent misunderstandings:

I do think there’s situations where it [RJ] would absolutely work, especially in those situations where there’s an education piece as well. In terms of consent and what consent looks like, and allowing the victim to actually speak to the offender, and say: ‘I was not consenting, this is why, this is what I did to demonstrate that,’ and also then to put some education pieces around it for that offender.

Multiple interviewees suggested that RJ could effectively address the complexities around consent in ways that the legal system typically fails to do, while recognising the gendered power dynamics that often underpin sexual violence. One legal professional noted:

In general ... there is no category of offending that’s better suited to RJ than the confused state of sexual offending, which is largely not being considered as confused. It’s being considered as insidious.

This interviewee elaborated on the nuanced reality of many sexual violence cases, particularly those involving miscommunication, substance use or unclear boundaries:

The heart of sexual assault is how people view themselves and how people view themselves against other people and where that line is. And, in my mind, it’s very clear, where that line should be, but not so much in a young person’s mind, it’s a product of the culture that that person lives in, where that line exists. For example, I know amongst many young males, sexual relationships are a social conquest, and that’s a really difficult situation to grapple with. And it’s hugely problematic, because there’s a currency pushing someone positively toward sex rather than positively toward issues of consent ... And in that murky world is a whole lot of misinformation and misunderstanding about exchanges. Most sexual offences occur where two parties are both intoxicated, and that adds another level. And I’ve always thought that restorative justice can debunk a lot of the misunderstandings, and although they’re still offences, both people can come out better.

These observations suggest that, by creating opportunities for learning about consent and challenging harmful sexist attitudes, RJ can provide an opportunity to prevent future harm. However, as this interviewee's observations make clear, such approaches must also grapple with deeply embedded cultural attitudes that position sexual relationships as conquests, rather than the product of mutual consent.

### *Addressing immediate needs in digital sexual violence*

The emergence of digital sexual violence, particularly image-based abuse, highlights how conventional CLS approaches may be misaligned with survivors' immediate needs. One police officer emphasised how victim priorities in these cases often differ from what the CLS typically provides:

I do think that RJ could go a long way. A lot of these victims ... don't want to go to court. So, especially [in relation to children and] intimate images, they don't want to go to court.

In image-based abuse cases, survivors often have straightforward but nonetheless urgent needs that conventional processes struggle to address:

They just want those images deleted; they're just living with that sort of gnawing fear in their stomach that these images are still being distributed.

The mismatch between conventional CLS timelines and the immediate nature of digital harm was highlighted as a particular challenge, with a police stakeholder explaining: 'What the person in the photo usually wants is just to have the photo deleted and make sure it stops being shared.'

Criminal legal processes often take months or years, while harmful digital content spreads instantly. RJ approaches offer potential solutions through direct interventions addressing survivors' urgent needs (such as image removal). Although not fully realised, RJ could evolve to better match digital harm's rapid pace, providing more immediate solutions. Informal RJ-like practices are already emerging in policing responses to digital sexual harm, particularly with young people. According to one of our police interviewees:

Some of the officers are taking it upon themselves to go out and mediate within peer groups. They would be absolutely perfect candidates for RJ. We have some very industrious constables that are going out and meeting with peer groups, and they're going to schools, and they're going from one house to the next of an evening, and really explaining to children and parents why this is a criminal offence and making sure things are deleted off devices.

The spontaneous emergence of these restorative-like practices suggests a recognition of the limitations of conventional approaches and the intuitive appeal of more direct, practically focused and dialogue-based interventions in these contexts. We are unaware of such practices being consistently used in the Australian Capital Territory or elsewhere.

## Summary

Our research provides evidence of both existing alternative pathways to RJ for sexual violence survivors and a significant appetite for expanding access to RJ, beyond the formal justice system or institutional disciplinary processes. These findings challenge binary thinking that positions RJ as either an alternative to, or an opponent of, traditional criminal justice processes. Instead, they suggest the value of multiple, complementary pathways that can address the diverse and evolving needs of sexual violence survivors.

One university stakeholder summarised it:

Just because you go through this door doesn't exclude that you might still want to consider some other processes. So to me it's just around providing people with the diversity of pathways that they might want to take or they might want to explore. Because not everybody wants to go through that formal process.

By offering multiple pathways to justice and healing, including both options in the formal CLS and more flexible community-based approaches, we can better meet the diverse needs of sexual violence survivors, while addressing the limitations of conventional responses.

## Implementing an expansive RJ vision

In this section, we transition from a primarily descriptive analysis of the current landscape to a more reflective discussion of how an expansive vision of RJ for sexual violence might be implemented. We identify principles and approaches to achieve this vision, grounded in our data.

### Guiding principles for implementation

Our findings suggest that effective implementation of an expansive vision of RJ for sexual violence should be guided by several key principles. These principles emerge from our interviewees' experiences, stakeholder assessment of successful and unsuccessful approaches and analysis of barriers and enablers.

#### *Balancing formal structures with community-led initiatives*

A consistent theme in our research (see Rossner et al. 2026) was the tension between formal, institutionally supported RJ processes and the possibilities of more flexible, community-led initiatives. This principle emerged from stakeholders' recognition of both the strengths and limitations of different approaches. The community-facilitated conference demonstrated this, showing how informal approaches could respond quickly and engage multiple affected parties—although it also highlighted challenges around adequate preparation time.

The Australian Capital Territory's formal RJ pathway within the CLS offers important benefits, including institutional legitimacy, resource stability, professional staffing and quality assurance mechanisms. However, our respondents noted that it also faces limitations, including institutional resistance, lengthy waiting periods and accessibility only to those who engage with the legal system.

Conversely, community-led and less formal RJ initiatives may offer greater flexibility, responsiveness to diverse needs and accessibility outside the CLS, but they struggle with precarious funding, limited capacity and challenges in maintaining consistent quality and safety. Moreover, at present, they are scarce.

Our research suggests that relying solely on either formal or community-based pathways is insufficient. Rather, implementation should harness the strengths of both top-down and bottom-up approaches. This balance might involve creating structures that provide necessary oversight, quality assurance and resources without imposing rigid requirements that limit flexibility or responsiveness to diverse community needs. It might also involve greater recognition, support and visibility for community-led initiatives that can reach people who may never engage with formal systems.

### *Centring survivor voice and agency*

Perhaps the most fundamental principle emerging from our research is the importance of centring survivor voice and agency throughout the implementation of RJ approaches. In contrast to conventional legal processes, where survivors often feel disempowered and sidelined, RJ should prioritise survivor voice, choice and control.

This principle was consistently emphasised across the stakeholder perspectives documented in our findings. Community sector professionals observed that survivors typically sought acknowledgement and apology, rather than punitive outcomes, while university professionals noted survivors' desires for processes that would allow their experiences to be heard. Student advocates similarly described seeking alternatives to formal reporting processes, demonstrating a pattern of survivors wanting greater voice and choice in justice processes.

This means that survivors firstly need clear, accessible information about all available options, both within and outside the CLS. Secondly, they need supported decision-making processes that respect their autonomy, while providing sufficient guidance. Thirdly, they need ongoing opportunities to shape processes according to their changing needs, including freedom to transition between different options or withdraw entirely. Finally, survivor perspectives should be central to program development, evaluation and improvement.

Centring survivor choice means addressing the current reality that many survivors are unaware of RJ options or encounter barriers to accessing them. It also requires recognition that survivors' justice needs are complex and may change over time, necessitating multiple, flexible pathways.

### *Addressing power dynamics and institutional risk aversion*

Our research highlighted how power dynamics and institutional risk aversion can undermine the implementation of effective RJ approaches. These dynamics operate at multiple levels, from interpersonal interactions within RJ processes to organisational decision-making about program development.

We recognise that sexual violence affects people of all genders. Nevertheless, sexual violence exhibits clear gendered patterns, with women comprising the vast majority of survivors and men most perpetrators. Any RJ approach must explicitly acknowledge and address these gendered power dynamics, rather than treating sexual violence as neutral interpersonal conflict. This requires recognition of how masculine norms around sexual entitlement and conquest (noted earlier) intersect with institutional cultures that may minimise or misunderstand sexual violence.

These gendered dynamics manifest differently across contexts. In educational institutions, for example, we found that risk management concerns sometimes prioritise institutional protection over student needs. Gendered power imbalances can sometimes also combine with cultural and leadership hierarchies, especially in culturally and linguistically diverse communities, to further limit women's participation in justice processes. In the CLS, hierarchical professional cultures can discourage referrals to alternative pathways that might better serve survivors' needs.

Effective implementation requires explicitly addressing these power dynamics rather than ignoring or working around them. This means acknowledging how patriarchal structures shape both the occurrence of sexual violence and institutional responses to it and designing RJ processes that challenge these dynamics. Practically, this involves transparent discussion of how risk management decisions impact survivor options, proactive engagement with institutional leaders to address risk aversion, better education and understanding of what RJ can and cannot offer survivors.

### *Cultural safety and appropriateness*

The importance of cultural safety emerged from stakeholders working across diverse communities. Culture significantly influences both experiences of sexual harm and perspectives on justice and healing. Although our data are somewhat limited in this regard, there was clear agreement about the importance of implementing RJ approaches that are culturally safe and appropriate for diverse communities.

For First Nations communities, this requires processes that recognise historical trauma, community dynamics and cultural practices—noting that, in many ways, restorative justice programs in Australia have not successfully done so to date (Price et al. 2024; Tauri 2022). For culturally and linguistically diverse communities, implementation must acknowledge the complexity of culture while avoiding tokenistic approaches that fail to address underlying power dynamics.

Effective implementation requires meaningful collaboration with cultural communities from the earliest planning stages, leadership and facilitation by people from within those communities, where possible, and the flexibility to adapt processes to align with cultural values and practices (Price et al. 2024). It also requires recognition of the diverse perspectives within cultural communities, rather than assumptions of homogeneity.

### *Trauma-informed approaches*

The pervasive impact of trauma emerged as a critical consideration in our research. Practitioners across various contexts emphasised the centrality of trauma-informed practice. Effective RJ implementation for sexual violence requires comprehensive trauma-informed practice at all levels. The literature highlights RJ's potential to support trauma recovery through voice, choice and empowerment and emphasises the risks of poorly implemented approaches that may exacerbate trauma. While RJ can align with trauma-informed practice, they are not identical, and RJ is not automatically trauma informed (Christen-Schneider 2025). Implementation must balance trauma awareness without treating survivors as inherently fragile or incapable of making their own decisions.

Trauma-informed implementation requires specialised training and process design minimising re-traumatisation, flexible timeframes respecting individual recovery, integration with trauma-specific therapeutic supports and recognition of vicarious trauma on practitioners. Claims of being 'trauma informed' should be scrutinised against established frameworks such as the *Roadmap for Creating Trauma-informed and Responsive Change* (Scottish Government 2023), which emphasises organisational culture, leadership, staff wellbeing, user feedback, power sharing and adequate resources.

### *The critical role of champions*

A significant finding from our research was the role of champions in developing and sustaining RJ initiatives. Across various contexts—universities, community organisations, faith communities and the CLS—the presence of committed individuals in positions of influence emerged as a key enabler of innovation and change. The examples presented here involved trained practitioners working independently or committed institutional leaders driving change.

These champions provided not only enthusiasm but also strategic vision, practical support and protection for emerging initiatives. However, our research also highlighted the vulnerability of champion-dependent approaches; when key individuals moved on, programs often faltered or declined without sufficient institutional ballast to sustain them.

Effective implementation requires strategies to identify, support and sustain champions, while also building more robust institutional structures that can survive personnel changes. This could include creating networks of champions across different sectors, providing resources and recognition for their work and developing mechanisms to institutionalise changes beyond individual advocacy.

### *Restorative justice as a pathway to prevention and response*

A final principle that should guide the implementation of an expansive vision of RJ is recognition of its unique capacity to bridge prevention and response. Conventional approaches often separate prevention and response into distinct categories, despite the reality that human experiences of harm and healing flow across these artificial boundaries. RJ offers a pathway that simultaneously addresses both. Such a link is rarely made in justice settings. Restorative practitioners in the field of education have long identified the ways restorative responses can work to build restorative cultures (Morrison, Blood & Thorsborne 2005; Thorsborne 2017), and this is also recognised in relation to environmental restorative justice (Forsyth et al. 2021). Implementation strategies should, therefore, explicitly acknowledge and leverage the capacity of restorative processes to heal past harms while simultaneously reducing the likelihood of future violence. This perspective aligns with the ACT Government's recognition that effective prevention and response are mutually reinforcing elements of addressing sexual violence (ACT Government 2021a).

### **Envisioning a pluralistic approach to RJ**

Building on these guiding principles and our data that underpin them, we suggest a pluralistic approach to RJ for sexual violence that embraces multiple pathways while facilitating better integration between them. This section explores what such an approach might entail, particularly focusing on power sharing between formal systems and communities.

#### *Beyond binary thinking: Multiple pathways to justice*

A consistent theme in our research was the limitation of binary thinking that positions RJ as either an alternative to or opponent of traditional criminal justice processes. This framing fails to capture the complex reality of survivors' justice journeys and the potential for complementary approaches.

A pluralistic approach would recognise and support multiple pathways to justice and healing. These pathways would not operate in isolation but would form an ecosystem of options that survivors could navigate according to their needs and preferences (Forsyth & Braithwaite 2020). This pluralistic landscape would recognise that survivors' justice needs are diverse and evolving, requiring multiple approaches rather than a singular 'best practice' model.

#### *True power sharing with communities*

A pluralistic approach necessitates genuine power sharing between formal systems and communities. Current approaches often privilege formal, professionally led processes while marginalising community-led initiatives, despite evidence that the latter can meet the needs of many survivors.

Such power sharing represents a significant shift from current approaches, which often expect communities to adapt to formal systems. It requires institutional humility and the willingness to learn from community wisdom, particularly in cultural contexts where Western justice models may be inappropriate or insufficient.

## Conclusion

The ALRC (2025) found that sexual violence survivors want information, participation options, validation, safety and accountability from justice systems. Although RJ is not a panacea, it has significant potential to address these needs. The process can create spaces where survivors and others harmed by sexual violence can reclaim power and agency, institutions and individuals can be held accountable, and communities can take collective responsibility for addressing and preventing sexual harm. This represents a compelling reason to pursue its implementation, despite the challenges involved. Although our research does not provide a definitive roadmap for implementation, it does offer insights into the principles, approaches and considerations that should guide this work. It also highlights the critical role of champions across different sectors: they can drive change, build relationships and sustain momentum, even in the face of challenges and resistance.

By embracing a genuinely pluralistic approach that values both formal and informal pathways, centres survivor choice, addresses power dynamics, ensures cultural safety and embeds trauma-informed practice, the Australian Capital Territory can continue its leadership in restorative innovation, while meeting the needs of survivors who have too often been failed by conventional justice responses.

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