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Media Release: Monday, April 3, 2017 Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC)

The Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC) stands in support of Ava Williams, and her claim against the London Police Services Board (London Police Service) for investigating her sexual assault and then dismissing her allegation as “unfounded”.

On October 16, 2010, Ava Williams was raped after a party in London, Ontario. She was taken to the hospital for a sexual assault examination and made a statement to the London Police Service. During the interview, the responding detective verbally reproduced common myths about sexual assault and sexual assault complainants. On November 13, 2010, the London Police Service closed the file as “unfounded”. Ms. Williams’ interview, which is recorded on video, was reviewed by a *Globe and Mail* investigation into police-reported sexual assault allegations in February 2017. The *Globe* investigation revealed how police services across Ontario record some sexual assault complaints as “unfounded” – a formal police classification that means “a crime was neither attempted, nor occurred”¹.

Today, Ms. Williams files a statement of claim against the London Police Services Board. As Ms. Williams’ statement outlines, gender bias can present in individual cases of sexual assault, reproducing myths about sexual violence and compromising the capacity of such cases to move forward in the criminal justice system. We at OCRCC stand behind Ms. Williams in speaking out about these experiences.

These experiences, unfortunately, are not unique to Ms. Williams, nor to London, Ontario. High unfounded rates -- and low conviction rates for reported sexual assaults – are widespread across Ontario. It was 1998, over fifteen years ago, when Madam Justice MacFarland (*Doe v Metropolitan Toronto Commissioners of Police*, 1998) noted: “One of the reasons suggested for the higher “unfounded” rate in relation to sexual assaults is the widespread adherence among investigating police officers to rape mythology, that is, the belief in certain false assumptions, usually based in sexist stereotyping, about women who report being raped”².

Today, to our frustration, these trends often persist. Gender bias, whether explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious, can manifest in the following ways:

- police officers misclassifying or underreporting sexual assault or domestic violence cases;
- inappropriately concluding that sexual assault cases are unfounded;
- interrogating rather than interviewing victims and witnesses”³,
- and other unintentional yet harmful practices⁴.

¹ Doolittle, R. for *The Globe and Mail*. February 3, 2017. Unfounded: Why police dismiss 1 in 5 sexual assault claims as baseless. Online: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/investigations/unfounded-sexual-assault-canada-main/article33891309/>

² Marriner, S. (Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre). 2016. VAW Advocate Case Review (VACR): 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ When sexual assault allegations are dismissed with high frequency – as is seen in many Ontario regions, including London -- it is often “a sign of deeper flaws in the investigative process: inadequate training for police; dated interviewing techniques...and the persistence of rape myths among law-enforcement officials. See: Doolittle, R. for *The Globe and Mail*. February 3, 2017. Unfounded: Why police dismiss 1 in 5 sexual assault claims as baseless. Online: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/investigations/unfounded-sexual-assault-canada-main/article33891309/>

Many of our own experiences as advocates working with survivors of sexual assault align with those of Ms. Williams. Simply too many sexual assaults are reported and do not result in charges. And simply too many assaults categorized as unfounded draw on sexual violence misconceptions which construct survivors as unreliable or untruthful⁵. Ms. Williams' case sheds light on the enormous systemic barriers that survivor-victims face.

Gender bias – that is, negative, feminized or sexual stereotyping of women and of victims – often impacts the successful reporting, prosecution and public understanding of sexual crimes. These patterns persevere, invisible and implicit. In this climate, victims often believe they performed poorly as witnesses in their cases, as opposed to understanding that systemic bias may have had a role to play.

Police services have an important role in supporting victims of sexual assault too. Opportunities to improve survivors' experiences exist if we work together to achieve them.

Over the last 20 years, much progress has been made in fostering supportive practices meant to address survivors' needs and hold offenders accountable. Police have been – and can be – an integral part of both. Research shows that a “critical part of improving law enforcement's response to allegations of sexual assault and domestic violence is identifying and preventing gender bias in policing practices”⁶.

Unchallenged, gender bias can “compromise law enforcement's ability to ascertain the facts, determine whether the incident is a crime, and develop a case that supports effective prosecution and holds the perpetrator accountable”⁷. Ms. Williams' statement of claim attests to this outcome.

There are many realistic reasons why those impacted by sexual violence are hesitant to engage with formal reporting systems. Some fear reprisal or retaliation. Most fear not being believed. Canadian research confirms the truth of this fear: in fact, “complainants who do not conform to stereotypes about the perfect victim” commonly wind up “with cases deemed unfounded at a disproportionate rate”⁸.

Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres stand behind all survivor-victims, including Ms. Williams. OCRCC recognizes the impact of sexual violence in Ontario. Together, we will make a difference.

To contribute to a fund that will help offset Ava's legal fees and other expenses related to this case, [click this link](#).

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The Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC) includes 29 sexual assault centres serving survivor-victims of sexual violence across Ontario. Sexual assault centres deliver free and confidential crisis, advocacy and ongoing support to survivors of sexual violence throughout all of Ontario. If you or someone you know has been affected by violence and are seeking support, please go to <http://www.sexualassaultsupport.ca/support>.

⁵ Patterson, D. 2011. The Impact of Detectives' Manner of Questioning on Rape Victims' Disclosure. *Violence Against Women*, 17(11) 1349–1373: 1370.

⁶ Marriner, S. (Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre). 2016. VAW Advocate Case Review (VACR): 2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Doolittle, R. for *The Globe and Mail*. February 3, 2017. Unfounded: Why police dismiss 1 in 5 sexual assault claims as baseless. Online: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/investigations/unfounded-sexual-assault-canada-main/article33891309/>