RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sexual violence and traumatic identity change: Evidence of collective post-traumatic growth

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Abstract

Recent research indicates that social identities play a crucial role in the connection between adversity, post-traumatic stress, and overall psychological well-being. Understanding of how trauma influences collective dimensions of the self, positively or negatively, is limited. This study focuses on analysing publicly accessible narratives of four women who chose to waive their anonymity after the conviction of the men who had attacked and sexually assaulted them in Ireland. Thematic analysis highlighted two themes that signal (i) collective dimensions to this personal trauma, (ii) attempts to reconstruct social identities in the aftermath of trauma. Women presented their experiences as having the potential to amplify positive connections with others despite the wider embedded sociocultural understanding of sexual assault. These changes were associated with redefinition of social identities. Discussion highlights the potential for personal and intimate trauma to result in positive social identity change; a phenomenon that we label collective post-traumatic growth.

KEYWORDS
collective growth, post-traumatic growth, sexual assault, social identity, trauma

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is solid evidence that trauma can have both positive and negative consequences for personal identities (Boals & Schuettler, 2011; Boals et al., 2010) but the relationship between trauma and changes in collective dimensions of the self is less well understood (Muldoon et al., 2019). In an era of movements, such as #metoo and #blacklivesmatter, there is a rising awareness of how the lived experience of women and people of colour are too often defined by a continuum of traumatic experiences (Jee-Lyn García & Sharif, 2015; Szymanski et al., 2021). In this paper, we explore how trauma and distress might drive alternative, or changed, views of group memberships and associated social identi-

ties in women affected by sexual violence. Although it is often assumed that such changes are negative, we consider, based on literature related to post-traumatic growth, the potential for positive- and growth-like changes in social identities in the aftermath of sexual violence.

1.1 | A social identity approach to understanding traumatic experience

Trauma has a high human cost. In particular, populations affected by rape and sexual violence have an increased risk, and higher prevalence, of post-traumatic stress symptoms (Berger et al., 2012; Breslau,

2009). Indeed, the US National Comorbidity Survey indicates that the incidence and prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from traumas that are a consequence of intentional acts, such as rape, is approximately twice that associated with unintentional and accidental traumas such as car accidents, fires and natural disasters (Kessler et al., 2005). The burden of post-traumatic stress disorder is estimated as 0.4% of the total disability from all causes of ill-health globally, making it a leading cause of mental ill health. Importantly though, more than two-thirds of all World Mental Health respondents reported traumatic experiences at some point in their lifetime and the most common outcome is psychological resilience.

Although individual explanations of pathways through trauma risk and resilience have dominated the literature, there is no doubt that understanding trauma trajectories is aided by a wider social and community lens (Hobfoll, 2010; Norris et al., 2008). Using a group-based lens informed by the social identity approach to understanding stress and trauma has highlighted how identities are an important psychological resource, mitigating the symptoms of post-traumatic stress and promoting resilience. Across a range of contexts, such as acquired brain injury (Walsh et al., 2015), bereavement by suicide (Kearns et al., 2017), earthquakes (Muldoon et al., 2017), political violence (Muldoon et al., 2009), domestic violence (Naughton et al., 2015) and even COVID-19 (Mao et al., 2021), maintenance of strong social identities appears to reduce symptoms and promote resilience. In the face of adversity, group memberships and social identities appear to offer a basis for collective efficacy and empowerment (Greenaway et al., 2015; Muldoon et al., 2017), belonging and social connectedness (Sani et al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2015), giving and receiving social support (Cocking et al., 2009; Haslam et al., 2005), and can mitigate feelings of threat (Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). However, whether or not these social identity-based changes can arise as a consequence of the trauma experienced is a gap in this research and it is explored here.

Alongside a growing understanding of the mechanisms that support resilience, we now also understand that traumatic events can lead to personal post-traumatic growth (PTG) (Joseph & Linley, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). In particular, the phenomenon of PTG is apparent in survivors who value their changed sense of perspective or changed sense of personal identity following trauma. Importantly, PTG differs from resilience as it goes beyond merely the *restoration* of a person's pre-trauma state of functioning. Rather it represents a positive change in previous ways of thinking, indicative of a reorientation of values or priorities in the wake of trauma. A growing body of research shows group memberships can drive personal PTG (Griffin et al., 2022; Muldoon et al., 2017). In women who have experienced gender-based violence in South Africa, for example, positive responses (including PTG) were facilitated by prior group membership, which acted as a platform for enhanced feelings of personal control and identification (Haslam et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with previous work that demonstrated involvement in anti-sexual assault activism promoted PTG (Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). These findings highlight the central role of identification with an activist group in driving personal PTG, and thus promotes the idea of a collective dimension to PTG, at least in the context of gender-based violence.

1.2 | Social identity, disclosure and gender-based violence

Research on self-disclosure of sexual violence demonstrates how victims can receive negative or mixed responses, not only from the public but from close others (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Gueta et al., 2020). A lack of willingness to believe affected groups and legitimizing myths remains a significant obstacle for individuals negotiating their violent experiences (Gómez & Gobin, 2020). For instance, women affected by sexual violence are routinely labelled as 'victims' or 'survivors' and are described as 'complex' within both mental health services and the justice system (Gómez & Gobin, 2020; Skjelsbæk, 2006). Others are constructed in even more derogatory ways such as 'silly girls' who were 'asking for it' (McMillan & White, 2015). Othering of those affected by sexual violence can result in considerable stigma (Kellezi et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2021). This positioning of victims can be seen to protect patriarchal hegemonies, which are not always easy to reveal using quantitative approaches because of the implicit and assumed nature of these beliefs.

Being unwilling to listen to or acknowledge women's experiences is grounded in gendered beliefs and negative attitudes to women (Lynch et al., 2017). Sex crimes during times of both peace and war disproportionately victimize women (Seifert, 1996; Swiss & Giller, 1993), demarcating a key difference in women's and men's everyday experiences of the world. This can be thought of as a reflection of Tajfel's (1982) proposition that the reification of social categories reflects meaningful social or political demarcation between groups. Trauma risk—in this case, the risk of sexual violence—informs the everyday life of one group, women, while remaining beyond the experience and sometimes even the imagination of another group, men. And although women are made aware of their risk of experiencing sexual violence because of their exposure to frequent sexual harassment (Lawson, 2020), intersectional risks (Seifert, 1996) mean that the felt risk of sexual violence is reduced in more advantaged ethnic or socioeconomic groups. It is also worth noting that public disclosure also runs the risk of revictimization and the adoption of a negative sense of self through a victim identity (Gueta et al., 2020). Taken together, these effects can mean that disempowerment and stigma are too often associated with being a victim of sexual violence.

As a counterpoint, there is also evidence of positive responses from others when speaking out about sexual assault. Research documents how speaking out publicly can aid recovery from assault and lead to positive mental health outcomes (e.g., Gueta et al., 2020; Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). Furthermore, some survivors report improved interpersonal relationships, a greater sense of community connection, as well as a growing sense of activism and contribution to social change following the experience of sexual violence (Gueta et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2018). This suggests that identity change, and positive identity change, do occur following a sexual assault, we believe that adopting a

social identity framework to understand these reports offer new ways of understanding the effects of trauma. We hypothesize, therefore, that there is potential for personal trauma to transform people's sense of their social selves and associated social identities, over and above any sense of individual personal growth, and hence, more akin to a form of collective post-traumatic growth.

1.3 | The present study

Resistance to assuming stigmatizing labels and identities presents a challenge for researchers interested in the role of identities in driving the impact of trauma. These labels are often resisted when they are ascribed to people in response to circumstances or events that arise from the actions of others (Bradshaw & Muldoon, 2020). Understanding how, from a position of both trauma and minoritization, women who disclose their experience of sexual violence negotiate these identity processes, offers a unique contribution to the literature on the social identity of trauma. Whilst there are likely to be identity processes at work, they are not likely to be amenable to quantitative metrification. This, and concerns about the role of power and positionality in the construction of those affected by sexual violence, is the key reason we approached our work using a qualitative framework.

The social identity perspective is particularly suited to the understanding of trauma (Drury, 2018; Muldoon et al., 2019). Social identities appear to play an important role in mitigating the impact of trauma on personal indicators of psychological health such as resilience, well-being and post-traumatic growth. Maintaining or revitalizing identities appears to support well-being and growth in the aftermath of traumas, including sexual violence. The relationship between trauma and potential social identity change is less well understood. There is evidence that trauma can result in the loss of valued identity resources and the acquisition of stigmatized identities; however, to date, no research has explored how those affected by sexual violence engage with new *group memberships* and the associated identity constructions arising from trauma. And there is an absence of research documenting any positive post-traumatic change in people's sense of self as group members in the aftermath of trauma. In particular, by examining this in the context of a stigmatizing trauma and a vulnerable group there is potential to extend our understanding of social identity and PTG.

In this paper, we therefore examine whether there is evidence of a positive change in social identity, but also how positive changes may relate to personal or even collective growth in those who have survived violent sexual assault in Ireland. Drawing on publicly available data, we completed a thematic analysis to consider how women construct themselves in the aftermath of their trials and the successful prosecution of men who attacked them. Our analysis focused on how women positively construct, perform and negotiate their social identities, and their sense of connections to significant others and to the wider national audience with whom they engaged, after forgoing anonymity (Muldoon et al., 2019).

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Data corpus

All cases of sexual violence in Ireland offer legally protected anonymity to both victim and perpetrator. Those who have been the victims of sexual violence, however, can choose to waive their anonymity after any conviction. Hence, we theoretically sampled the total number of cases (four) in the Republic of Ireland of women who waived their anonymity and were sexually assaulted when they were over the age of 17 (the age of consent in Ireland) since the first occasion where a woman waived her anonymity in 1992. One in five adult women (20.4%) in the Republic of Ireland report that they have experienced a sexual assault at some point during their lifetime, indicating how few women are willing to speak publicly about their experience (McGee & Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, 2002). Hence, these victims of sexual violence who waived their legal right to anonymity are a group of interest because this legal protection offered to victims is designed to protect against ongoing and serious stigma faced by victims of sexual violence. Ostensibly, their decision to waive anonymity has a personal cost given that the impact of stigma on post-traumatic outcomes is well established (Ahrens, 2006; Holland et al., 2020). We therefore hypothesize that the motivation to waive anonymity is likely to be grounded in *collective* rather than individual considerations. For this reason, our qualitative analysis centred on the discourse of this group of women and whether it offered evidence of social identity change driven by the experience of their trauma.

An online search was therefore carried out and cases were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (i) the case entailed a sexual assault on someone above the age of consent, which in Ireland is 17 years, (ii) the victim in the case waived their right to anonymity and spoke publicly, and (iii) the case resulted in a legal conviction for sexual assault in the Republic of Ireland. This search returned four cases, which were all white Irish women. This is the total number of cases, in the Republic of Ireland, of people who have waived their anonymity after a criminal conviction against the assailant for sexual assault. Further demographics are presented in Table S1.

Once these cases were identified we expanded the online search to retrieve all videos, podcasts, or newspaper articles that offered direct quotes or interviews with, or were written by, one of the four women. These data were not generated with research in mind, and though it is a strength that they occurred naturally (Wetherell & Potter, 1992), equally it needs to be borne in mind that these news data were created with particular interests and audiences. All the data was available in the public domain on or before 1 July 2021. For the first case, that of Lavinia Kerwick (1992), a total of 72:46 min of interviews and 612 words of newspaper articles were identified. The second case was Niamh Ní Dhomhnaill (2012), from which we identified 82:39 min of interviews and 1137 words of newspaper articles. The third case Dominique Meehan (2015) was associated with 55:06 min of interviews and 855 newspaper articles. The final case, Sarah Grace

(2019) was associated with 30:20 min of interviews and 5197 words of newspaper articles.

Braun et al. (2016) suggest a minimum of six interviews but acknowledge that this is only a *suggestion* and different research questions and designs may necessitate less. In this regard, the sample is hard to acquire as women do not readily waive their anonymity and speak publicly. However, we accumulated a substantial amount of data for each woman across several different sources over time. These included interviews, public statements, written accounts, and one letter to a government minister that was printed in a national newspaper, the *Irish Times*. Though the sources differed this variation allowed a form of triangulation around issues raised across these various media. The total size of the corpus was 4 h and 51 s spoken, which was transcribed, giving 7801 words of text. Further details of these data are presented in Table S1.

2.2 | Analytic framework

We employed a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), which entails situating meaning making and knowledge in the relevant social, cultural, and historic context while also acknowledging the researchers' subjectivities within the research process. Thematic analysis is a flexible approach that affords the generation of themes from talk or text while recognizing the reality of material constraints. Specifically, we take a critical realism position, which distinguishes between ontological realism and epistemological constructivism (Bhaskar, 1975, 1979; Pilgrim, 2019). It acknowledges an unobservable, extra discursive, ontological reality that is independent of people's perceptions, theories and constructions but also takes an epistemological stance that acknowledges our enquiry of this reality is *mediated* through shared discourses and influenced by social power. Our knowledge of reality is therefore a transient social product, which is historically, culturally and socially situated.

This approach allows us to combine a theoretically driven, deductive, top-down approach, which specifically draws on the social identity approach to trauma (Drury, 2018; Muldoon et al., 2019) with an inductive, bottom-up, data-driven focus on how the women who have experienced sexual assault and waived their anonymity construct their social identities. Although our approach is epistemologically distinct from critical discourse analysis (Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) we borrow from this, to account for the mediating role of language, by carrying out a micro fine-grained analysis that probes the data for how the women constructed, performed and negotiated their social identities in relation to the macro social and cultural context (for similar see; Drury & Reicher, 2000). Wetherell (2007) notes that 'critical discursive psychology combines micro and macro discourse approaches including, increasingly, narrative analysis and often combines these with other approaches such as psychoanalysis or social identity theory in social psychology' (e.g. Billig, 1995; Condor, 2006; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). This frees the analysis from the tight methodological constraints of conversa-

tion analysis, to focus on the social psychological issue (Wetherell, 2007).

Reflexive TA assumes the subjectivities of the researchers to be a valuable resource that informs the research process. In this regard, we note that we are a mixed-gender research team but we approach the data from an outsider's position because although some of us may have experienced sexual harassment and even sexual assault (we did not press each other to disclose this personal matter), none of us has been in a position where we brought legal charges against a perpetrator of a sexual offence, then waived our anonymity and spoken publicly about the experience. In other words, we are naïve about the experiences of these women who are plunged into the public spotlight concerning such a contentious and sensitive personal issue. This positions us as being empathetic, respectful and interested in these women whose voices are analysed here.

2.3 | Procedure

All public statements and interviews were transcribed fully. The analysis followed five recursive steps based on the recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). The first was immersion in the data to gain familiarity with the data through engagement and reflection. This was achieved by two members of the team who listened to the recordings, watching the videos, and reading and re-reading the transcripts and newspaper articles. Notes were made based on the initial interpretations of how social identities were discussed and presented. Second, codes were allocated, using NVivo software, which focussed on any suggestion of positive change in social identity, particularly in terms of how the women constructed, performed, and negotiated their social identities in terms of the overarching socio-cultural and political context and potential post-traumatic social identity change. The codes were flexible and organically evolved as they expanded and contracted, and at times split or collapsed into one. The initial 52 codes are presented in the supplementals. Third, the codes were collapsed into loose overlapping clusters which formed the basis for the themes and extracts of interest. Extracts that were agreed by the research team to share common features were compiled together in a separate document and labelled. Extracts that covered prevalent concerns across participants formed the basis for the development of the themes outlined below but, at the same time, it has to be acknowledged that each woman's account of their experience was idiosyncratic. Fourth, a comparison was made between and across speakers purposefully explored commonalities as well as deviant cases that contradicted the analytic assessment at this point (Wiggins & Potter, 2007). Fifth, the themes and relevant extracts were discussed by the research team. In line with our use of reflexive thematic analysis we did not employ inter-coder reliability but rather accepted that meaning is situated and contextual (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore we worked to achieve consensus amongst the team on the analytic interpretation of the themes and representative extracts.

EXTRACT 1 (Sarah Grace on **Today with Claire Byrne, RTE Radio 1, 11 March 2021**)

SG: = Um I have to say I've been just floored and blown away by the response and the *support* from everyone like I didn't I thought there would be a bit of a reaction I was not expecting something to this scale (.) um and I am so grateful to people for reaching out because (.) it you know this doesn't just concern victims it also concerns their families their friends their wider circle

EXTRACT 2 (Niamh Ní Dhomhnaill addresses the Women's Aid Annual Impact Report launch, 20 August 2020)

I can only imagine what it's like for others who are too frightened to talk about it who maybe are still at the cusp of realizing what their experiences are and I actually think for those reasons it's really important that I continue to speak not just publicly but with colleagues of mine and for us to talk about shame and stigma within our own circles

I really don't want to be known as a victim or a survivor uhm because it consistently ties me to an individual (.) uhm whose actions I didn't control they weren't my actions they were his and I don't see why I should be defined by his

3 | RESULTS

The analysis exposed two interdependent themes. The first theme *'This doesn't just concern victims': collective dimensions of personal trauma*, demonstrated that even the most personal and intimate of traumas was presented as being a source of distress to others, not just for individual victims but the women's wider social networks and groups. In other words, post-traumatic identity change is apparent not because the women personally acquired a victim or survivor identity label, but because they express how they are now more connected to a broader collective which is experiencing the negative consequence of sexual violence. The second theme *'We lead the way and can be proud of the changes': speaking up to redefine the group*, highlights how women describe a sense of responsibility to others to speak out to bring about positive social, cultural and political change in the broader collective. Hence, post-traumatic identity change is evident because the women describe a new-found motivation to speak out and seek change for those who they perceived as being similar to themselves, because of their past or future risk of sexual violence. In invoking this sense of responsibility to others, the trauma shared by many women privately and individually was reconstructed as a shared issue that was unacceptable to the wider national collective. In this way, the need for socio-cultural and legal change was intrinsically tied to a new and better definition of who 'we' are and what is acceptable to 'us'.

3.1 | Theme 1: 'This doesn't just concern victims': Collective dimensions of personal trauma

Extract 1 is drawn from Sarah Grace's case, in 2021, who experienced a violent sexual assault by a man who broke into her apartment whilst she was sleeping 2019. The attacker Ibrahim Elghynaoui, unknown to her at the time, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for aggravated sexual assault. She stated that she primarily waived her anonymity to highlight failings in the legal system. In this extract from an interview on Irish national radio, she describes her personal experience of speaking publicly and her gratitude for the public response which she positions as validating her claim that sexual violence affects people beyond direct victims.

Sarah begins by outlining her strong affective reaction (Martinussen & Wetherell, 2019)—'floored and blown away'—to the unexpected 'scale' of the 'response and the support' she received due to her speaking publicly. She describes how she is personally 'grateful', not just to people close to her but to everyone and 'people' in general for express-

ing their solidarity with her by 'reaching out'. However, it needs to be stressed that Sarah's gratitude is presented as something that goes beyond her and even 'doesn't just concern victims'. Crucially, after going public about her own experience, she emphasizes the importance of this supportive 'reaction' for other 'victims' but also, using an open-ended three-part list (Edwards & Potter, 1992), she claims, 'it also concerns their families their friends their wider circle.' She also pre-empts this statement with 'you know', which potentially signals a common sense shared understanding with the audience (Fox Tree & Schrock, 2002). In other words, Sarah does not only orient to her personal feelings or even limit her concern to other victims but extends the potential beneficiaries of the clear supportive response to families and friends and an extensive 'wider circle'—a collective who share her view that sexual violence is a social concern.

Evidently, Sarah's post-traumatic identity change after the sexual assault is not merely a change to the victim or survivor but involves changes which include all those who have offered her 'support' and her 'wider circle' who also experience the negative effect of sexual violence. In other words, Sarah presents the personal trauma of being an individual who has experienced sexual assault as a shared collective concern.

Extract 2 draws on Niamh Ní Dhomhnaill who was raped repeatedly whilst she was sleeping and suffered psychological abuse by her former partner Magnus Meyer Hustveit, which she disclosed in 2015. He admitted to the sexual assaults in an email and pleaded guilty in court but initially only received a 7-year non-custodial or suspended sentence. This prompted Niamh to waive her anonymity and speak about her case. Niamh also described the benefits of her speaking in public about her experience of rape for others who share her experience but who may feel they cannot speak. However, she is clearly aware that a public position comes with potential personal risk but is hoping that it will allow space for shared and ongoing discussion of sexual crime.

Here Niamh begins by describing her act of speaking publicly as a form of action that is aimed at promoting a conversation within her social 'circles' contesting the 'shame' and 'stigma' of sexual assault. Speaking to the issue of stigma experienced by those affected by sexual violence, she highlights the reason why her continued action is necessary—due to her concern for 'others … too frightened to talk' and them not 'realizing' 'what their experiences are'. She displays concern for the wider collective of women who have experienced sexual assault

EXTRACT 3 (Niamh Ní Dhomhnaill on Roisin Ingle's *Irish Times* podcast, July 2015)

> I suppose you expect that you just be (.) uhh broken but I I certainly don't feel it um and I think that's um that's it certainly there's a lot to do with the fact that people have been outraged and very supportive and people I know and people I don't know um (.) and (.) I it's it's very heartening to hear that people are are speaking about rape and that they're speaking about (.) um a topic that a lot of us tend to avoid because we don't want to think about it so I think there's a lot of positives to what has not necessarily been a particularly nice situation and certainly a very unexpected outcome perhaps =

EXTRACT 4 (Dominique Meehan on *The Ray D'Arcy Show*, RTE Radio 1, 23 May 2019)

> RD: but it means that you have to in a way (.) not relive (.) you know the trauma of your rape over and over again?
> DM: = um I wouldn't I wouldn't say um (.)
> I have to relive it over and over again it's um
> I know from telling my story that there are other people out here like we all know the statistics it's one in four women one in thirty-three men and half of all trans people (.) in Ireland that are attacked like this they're sexually assaulted and I know (.) that um people in my convention community my LGBT community that if I don't speak up who will?

and can only 'imagine' the plight of those who are silenced. This is a necessary action: not only speaking but also a mobilization of a discussion on the issue of 'shame and stigma' with her colleagues and broader open-ended social 'circles'. It is important to note here that she shifts her footing from talking about the necessary action for herself as an individual to what should be done at the collective level—what should be done by 'us … within our own circles'.

Niamh invokes an identity that cannot be easily labelled despite it being socially shared and mobilizing (Durrheim, 2012; Durrheim et al., 2016; Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017). By the same token, Niamh explicitly rejects the category and identity labels 'survivor' and 'victim' that define her by the actions of her attacker. Niamh highlights that sexual violence results in people, mostly women, being defined and stigmatized by the violating actions of the perpetrator. Notably, at this point, she presents her known attacker, as a nameless 'individual'. It is likely that most of her audience at the Women's Aid, a charity that supports victims of domestic and gender-based violence, would know that for many women their attacker is someone with whom they have had a relationship. Women are routinely defined by their relationship with men (Dent, 2020). Niamh in presenting her attacker as a nameless 'individual' resists and rejects this narrative and asserts her position that she should be 'defined' by her own 'actions' and not this irrelevant 'individual'. Similar to Sarah in the previous extract, Niamh expresses what appears to be post-traumatic identity change by taking up an agentic and empowered position that rejects the prescribed stigmatizing identity labels—victim or survivor. Both women are seen to take up membership in broader collectives, which are also impacted by the negative consequences of sexual violence. Both women point to a changed identity within the 'wider circle' (Sarah Grace; Extract 1) and 'our own circles' (Niamh Ní Dhomhnaill; Extract 2).

In Extract 3, Niamh Ní Dhomhnaill speaking in a different interview further highlights the benefits of speaking publicly by drawing on her experience and states how encouraging it is to know that a public discussion has begun.

In this third extract, the conversation has moved away from victims and their networks of support and speaks to a wider consequence for 'us' and a broad open-ended collective 'people I know and people I don't know'. Like Sarah Grace in Extract 1, Niamh highlights that she is not 'broken' and attributes this to 'the outraged and very supportive' response from others whom she does and does not know. This response

is thus something that exists as a result of a shared collective 'outrage' in response to her account of her experience. Furthermore, Niamh states that it is 'heartening' that 'people' are now 'speaking about rape', a topic often enshrouded with silence, and she positions herself within this group by acknowledging it is 'a topic a lot of us tend to avoid'.

She concludes by referring to these wider public conversations about sexual violence amongst those of 'us' she does and does not know as 'a very unexpected outcome'. She sees these as collective or shared 'positives' arising from her 'situation'. This can be seen as a form of collective post-traumatic growth, a renewed and positive sense of Niamh's collective sense of herself, 'us', arising from her traumatic experience. Hence, similar to the two previous extracts, Niamh describes her post-traumatic identity change as she now takes up membership in a broader collective 'us', made up of people who she does and does not know, who are now talking about the collective concern of sexual violence.

3.2 | Theme 2: 'We lead the way and can be proud of the changes': speaking up to redefine the group

While Theme 1 explored the way that the women present their individual experiences as connecting them to a broader collective, Theme 2 explores the way that the women present post-traumatic growth through taking an activist role for the betterment of this collective (and the wider national group). Post-traumatic identity change includes a sense of responsibility to speak out and was presented as offering social space for discussion within the national community to enable the rejection of the shame and stigma associated with being positioned as a victim of sexual violence. This was presented as affording benefits including a changed, redefined and more positive sense of shared social identities.

Extract 4 is drawn from an interview with Dominique Meehan who was violently raped by Keith Hearne, whom she did not know, in a movie room at a well-attended computer games convention in Dublin in 2015. In 2017, the perpetrator who pleaded guilty received a 12-year sentence. In 2019 his appeal, which caused Dominique significant distress, was rejected. In Extract 4, Dominique Meehan is responding to an interviewer's query about the personal cost of her decision to waive her anonymity.

EXTRACT 5 (Lavinia Kerwick on *The Ray D'Arcy Show*, RTE Radio 1, 26 November 2018)

RD: you said like you were raped once and then the court case was as bad? =

LK: yeah

RD: that shouldn't be the case

LK: No

RD: sure how would how would you expect anybody to come forward if they hear that? =

LK: = yeah but you know the .hhh oh god it's um I can't I can't sit here and say don't report it because I feel strongly [about reporting rape]

RD: [I know I know]

LK: I I absolutely feel strongly about it you know if you don't report it then a what what are we what message are we sending out you know we had foreign visitor here and she was [raped]

RD: [Yeah]

LK: so do we want to become what's what are we known as the land of a thousand welcomes? (RD: yes) do we want to be known as the land of a thousand rapes? (.) do you know so if we do, if we stop reporting it (.) then it's a free reign for rapists (.)

In this sequence, the interviewer is interested in the personal psychological toll of the decision to speak publicly. In response, Dominque makes clear that her motivation is not driven by individual interests but by her collective concern for her 'communities'. She redirects the conversation away from the personal cost of retelling her story 'over and over again' to 'other people out here'. She has become aware of others who share the same type of traumatic experience—'I know from telling my story that there are other people out here.' In contrast to the more usual 'out there' phrasing used to refer to the radio listeners, she locates other victims 'here' and highlights the broader collective distress 'in Ireland [where people] are attacked like this they're sexually assaulted.' She underscores the prevalence of the collective distress caused by sexual assault by employing a three-part list—'one in four women one in thirty-three men and half of all trans people'. Dominique makes it clear these are 'statistics' that are common knowledge—'we all know'. But the scale of the distress is juxtaposed alongside her tacit knowledge of the silence within her 'convention community' and 'LGBT community', making it incumbent on her to speak up on behalf of those victims in her communities through the rhetorical question—'if I don't speak up who will?' In short, her experience appears to have revitalized her connection to her communities as evidenced by her need to protect them. Her post-traumatic identity change is evident as she now feels responsible and empowered to speak on behalf of her community about the prevalence of sexual violence and if she doesn't speak up who will? This social identity position was unavailable before her traumatic experience of sexual assault.

Extract 5 is taken from Lavinia Kerwick who was violently raped by William Conry, her boyfriend at the time, after a New Year's Eve disco in 1991. Lavinia took the unprecedented step and became the first survivor of rape, in the Republic of Ireland, to waive her anonymity

and speak publicly, in 1992, after the initial hearing of the case was adjourned for 1 year, even though Conry confessed to raping her. At the second hearing, one year later, Conry received a non-custodial 9-year suspended sentence.

In Extract 5 Lavinia Kerwick is being interviewed on an afternoon talk show broadcast on the national RTE radio in 2018. The interviewer orients to Lavinia's original statement in 1992, also on Irish national radio, where Lavinia described her dealings with the court system as bad as being 'raped'. However, the host Ray D'Arcy exposes a dilemma: how can victims be persuaded to report the offence to the police when the legal system is so problematic? Lavinia begins by confirming that she stands by her previous description that her experience of the court case was as bad as being raped. The interviewer proceeds to point out that although he thinks the dysfunctional court system 'shouldn't' operate in this way, he also suggests that Lavinia—'you'—is potentially overstating the traumatic experience of the court system, which could put victims off 'coming forwarding if they hear that.'

This raises a significant dilemma for Lavinia—'oh god.' But she is quick to make her position explicit—people should be encouraged to report rape and she 'feel[s] strongly about this.' Ray, the interviewer, agrees. But in stark contrast to Ray who appears to distance himself from the dilemma of the problematic court system, by using the referent 'you', Lavinia positions herself as a representative of the collective 'we'. Here, however, 'we' is not just women and those affected by sexual violence; rather, the collective of concern is the nation, evident through the reference to a common trope used to characterize Ireland as the 'land of a thousand welcomes'. In pointing to a case of a 'foreign visitor' who was raped she makes it clear that not reporting is not an acceptable solution. The status quo, disincentivizing reports of sexual assaults prompts a question that she asks the interviewer and national audience to consider 'do we want to be known as the land of a thousand rapes?'

She highlights the need for change, through the use of common shared understanding 'you know' as patently the right thing if 'we' want to prevent 'free reign for rapists'. Lavinia takes up an agentic position of change, highlighting her group membership as an Irish person, and draws on a positive trope of Irishness to question what do 'we' want to 'become'. She actively constructs her sense of collective national identity in support of an alternative and better future for Ireland. The post-traumatic identity change is evident in the way Lavinia describes a sense of responsibility to unquestionably convince others who experience sexual violence to report it to the police even though this may be personally problematic.

Our final extract is taken from an open letter Sarah Grace wrote in the *Irish Times*, which explicitly promotes change in the justice system to protect victims of sexual violence. Here she presents an opportunity for a better version of the national collective.

In Extract 6, Sarah sets up sexual violence as a problem that that affects 'us all' as Irish people. She then positions herself as a prototypical spokesperson (Haslam et al., 2011) using 'we' and 'our' and defines the evolving 'progressive' 'fairer' character of Irish identity. She presents an opportunity to act, to be in line with the contemporary norms, shared values and beliefs of Irishness (Reicher & Hopkins,

EXTRACT 6 (open letter to Helen McEntee TD, Minister for Justice from Sarah Grace: Call for changes to the justice system for sexual violence victims. 23 March 2021)

> Sexual violence affects us all. In Ireland, 42% of women and over one in five men will become a victim of rape or sexual violence in their lifetime (SAVI 2002). Our justice system should be designed to keep these victims at the forefront and centre of proceedings, and not an after-thought at trial.

> Ireland may be small, but our actions in recent years have been mighty. We have blazed a trail forward in fighting for fairer and more progressive laws, being the first nation to legalize marriage equality by popular vote and tearing down outdated laws on divorce and abortion. There has been a huge shift in public opinion, and we now have an opportunity to act. I am hopeful that this can become yet another area in which we lead the way and can be proud of the changes achieved.

2001), which tore 'down outdated laws'. This construction of the collective national identity is presented as a global endeavour. The argument extends beyond Ireland, which, although a 'small' nation, is portrayed as being 'mighty' in blazing a trail forward in fighting for fairer laws. She invokes recent legislative changes supporting access to marriage equality, divorce and abortion and recognizes the role of solidarity in support of people who have experienced sexual violence—'a huge shift in public opinion'—as the basis for further action. She connects this changing characterization of Irish identity to her own personal ambition, stating 'I am hopeful.' Indeed, her personal hope is driven by her sense that societal norms have changed, a sense of social solidarity offered to victims and a reinvigorated sense that the collective 'we' 'have an opportunity to act'. Arising then from a personal traumatic experience is the possibility for Ireland to be redefined as a global leader where we can collectively be 'proud of the changes achieved'. Her post-traumatic identity change is apparent in her responsibility to the nation, and her hope and pride rooted in her in national identity, to speak out by writing to the Minister for Justice to demand legal change for women who have experienced sexual violence.

4 | DISCUSSION

Our analysis of public conversations by those affected by sexual violence highlights the victims' descriptions of how a personal trauma, even one as intimate as rape, has psychological consequences that go beyond individuals' own health and sense of personal identity. In the first theme, we have highlighted how speakers describe that a personal traumatic experience can lead to changes in their sense of connection to others. Although the stigma of rape was a key feature of the conversations we analysed, post-traumatic changes to women's social identity resources were not depicted as being exclusively negative. The second theme highlighted an altered and often enhanced sense of responsibility to others within their group to speak out and redefine the broader social group. Post-traumatic identity change is evident as the women garnered agency and strength from those with whom they shared distress to seek social cultural and legal change. Having waived their anonymity following highly publicized court cases, these women used their voices to push collective conversations about rape and sexual violence. In their talk, they offered a transformed or renewed vision for their groups and communities and in so doing sought to reimagine their valued social identities in a way that would support and protect victims of sexual violence.

The women are seen to take up post-traumatic identity positions that would not be available to them prior to their personal trauma of sexual violence. They could have become campaigners against sexual violence, but without their personal experience of trauma due to sexual violence, they could not have pressed charges against the perpetrator, waived their anonymity, and garnered support from the broader collective by speaking publicly about their trauma experience. They could not have gained the public standing and position of responsibility to speak out on behalf of others who are similar to them who have or may in the future experience sexual violence. The current work relates to other recent material considering identity development following self-disclosure of sexual assault but offers social identity as a useful way to conceptualize these changes. The work of Gueta et al. (2020) and Strauss Swanson and Szymanski (2020) parallels the current paper with disclosure including the individual's recognition of their position within a wider collective and the identity-growth role of social activism.

Though we know from previous research that shame and silence can amplify symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Ahrens, 2006), our analysis highlights that this silence and shame can also give rise to collective concerns. Even those who are traumatized themselves worry for those who share their experiences or might in the future share their experience. This offered a potential route to strengthening collective norms against gender-based violence as well as altering perceptions of rape and rape victims (Lynch et al., 2017). Our analysis also indicates that judicial systems that make securing a conviction for sexual assault extremely difficult are also silencing. This silencing prevents discussion of the underlying causes of victims' experiences—primarily men's violence towards women. On the other hand, by reconstructing their personal experience as a socially shared phenomenon, women were able to harness social solidarity with others directly and indirectly affected. This presented opportunities for a renewed and revitalized sense of connections to other victims and to the wider social network that also experiences the negative consequence of sexual assault.

Some of the social identity changes described by these women appear to reflect a form of collective post-traumatic growth, a concept not identified previously in social psychological literature. Their traumatic experience is presented as offering these women an alternative view of how they were perceived and treated because of their rape. In line with other findings detailing individual post-traumatic stress and post-traumatic growth, these women describe how trauma drives both collective distress and collective growth. Similarly, and in line with the idea that altruism can be driven by personal suffering (Staub

& Vollhardt, 2008; Vollhardt & Staub, 2011), their distress can be seen to transform their social identities. Wider research reminds us that disclosure does not come without risks but disclosure can also afford positive collective identification (e.g., Gueta et al., 2020). The women also portray how a shared sense of 'us' emerges from the traumatic experience and its aftermath. Those who shared experiences of sexual violence, those who witnessed it, those in communities of risk, and the national community were all made relevant. Reference to these collectives and communities drove alternative and re-imagined versions of a shared future. A narrative was presented of a revitalized and energized sense of social identity that was proactive and understanding of the need for collective change to protect future victims.

Our study was limited by the number of people who had waived their anonymity subsequent to convictions in rape cases in Ireland. Of note, these cases were all white Irish women which may impact the generalizability of the findings. Despite this, we accumulated a substantial body of real-world data that represented ecologically valid discourse. That said, women who secure convictions in the court system are likely to be those who suffer the least ambiguity around their attack and victimhood, given the criminal conviction of their attacker. As such the potential for this group of women to experience both solidarity and collective growth may be enhanced.

The current research focused on four Irish women's engagement with activism through newspaper and broadcast media. More recent accounts of the #MeToo movement (e.g., Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Gueta et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2018; Strauss Swanson & Szymanski, 2020) see the broadening of affected individuals' engagement with activism facilitated through online media. Here the women's voices were, of course, mediated by news media and journalists with specific audiences in mind and we believe that it offers further evidence of activism facilitated, on this occasion by main stream media. Involvement in activism itself is seen as a catalyst to further identity transformation (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Drury et al., 2003).

Our research has two potential implications. First, given the importance of solidarity and connection in positive sentiments expressed by these women, it is possible that a group-based approach supporting those affected by traumatizing stigma may have particular value because of the group-based connections that are made available (Bradshaw & Muldoon, 2020). However, intervention groups cannot change the position of minoritized groups in society. Although the literature on personal psychological distress and the literature on collective political action are often poles apart, traumatic experiences and social inequities are inextricably linked (Muldoon, 2013). As such traumatic experiences may be a key factor in the development of collective action and leadership for action. Our findings suggest that personal experience of trauma often resulted in women feeling mandated to act because of their shared social identities. This, along with the shared experience of many traumatic experiences, even those that are very personal, may have important consequences for collective agency and growth, which speaks to the relevance of traumatic experience as a driver of collective action and social change. Overall, we aimed to consider wider social or collective consequences of their personal trauma or drive an alternative, or new, view of group memberships. Identify-

ing the extent, scale, and impact of the phenomenon is a task for future research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
There are no known conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
All of the data analysed in this paper are in the public domain.

ETHICS STATEMENT
The University of Limerick research ethics committee reviewed and approved this project. Publicly available broadcasts and communications do not require the consent of the speakers. However, we have communicated with those whose public talk is analysed in this paper and made them aware of this work. The study conforms to ethical standards articulated in the Declaration of Helsinki.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.