
Sexual Harassment and the Developing Sense of Self Among Adolescent Girls

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ABSTRACT

Girls encounter various forms of violence as a common part of their everyday lives. In recognition of the obstacles and challenges faced by this population, a multiphased national action study was conducted by the Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence. The primary focus was to examine how violence becomes normalized in the lives of girls. In this paper, we present findings from the Ontario component of the project with particular attention to sexual harassment as it is experienced and understood by girls. Findings reveal that sexual harassment occurs in a highly public manner; it is supported and condoned in subtle and explicit ways; and through its enactment, girls are continually silenced and their sense of selves diminished. Implications for counsellors working with this population, and strategies for encouraging and affirming healthy resistance, are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Diverses formes de violence sont le lot quotidien des filles. Afin de mieux cerner les obstacles et défis rencontrés par cette population, une étude d'action nationale à plusieurs phases a été entreprise par l'Alliance des cinq centres de recherche sur la violence. Le premier objectif était d'examiner comment la violence devient la norme dans la vie des filles. Dans cet article, nous présentons les conclusions de la composante ontarienne du projet en nous attachant particulièrement au harcèlement sexuel tel qu'il est vécu et compris par les filles. Les conclusions révèlent que le harcèlement sexuel se pratique d'une manière très publique. Il est soutenu et approuvé de plusieurs façons subtiles et explicites. Sous son influence, les filles sont continuellement réduites au silence et le sens qu'elles ont d'elles-mêmes est érodé. Dans cet article, il est discuté des implications pour les conseillers intervenant auprès de cette population et des stratégies encourageant et soutenant une saine résistance.

Sexual harassment is one of the most common forms of gender-based violence routinely encountered by girls in their everyday lives. Despite this reality, many factors have contributed to a widespread reluctance to acknowledge its existence

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and harmful effects among this population. When first described, sexual harassment was viewed primarily as a form of violence experienced by women in the workplace. During the 1980s, several researchers and scholars addressed the problem of sexual harassment among university women. In more recent years, there has been growing recognition that sexual harassment begins much earlier, and that it is a common feature of girls' lives in their homes, their schools, and their communities (Staton & Larkin, 1993). Still, while there is a considerable body of research related to the sexual harassment of women in the workplace and university women, relatively little attention has been paid to the sexual harassment of young girls and adolescent females (Berman, McKenna, Traher Arnold, MacQuarrie, & Taylor, 2000; Dahinten, 1999).

Lying at one end of the violent behaviours continuum, sexual harassment may be construed as "the first and most vital entry point into training males to dominate and violate females and females to submit to this domination and violation as an inevitable part of 'the way life is'" (Rooney, 1998, p. 5). As a form of sexual violence, sexual harassment is a fundamental vehicle by which gender inequality is entrenched, expressed, and reinforced in the lives of women and girls. According to June Larkin (1994), sexual harassment may be defined as "an expression of sexism which reflects and reinforces the unequal power that exists between men and women in our patriarchal society." This harassment may take many forms: verbal harassment including demeaning comments, insults, demands, threats, harassing phone calls, or racist remarks; physical harassment such as grabbing, touching, flashing, fondling; or visual harassment including leering, ogling, pornography, and demeaning graffiti.

Because of the amorphous and often insidious nature of sexual harassment, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence with which this form of violence occurs. Further, discrepancies regarding the reported incidence of sexual harassment can likely be attributed, at least in part, to differences in the definitions that are used. For example, the American Association of University Women Foundation (AAUW, 1993) reported that sexual harassment was experienced by 81% of girls, aged nine to fifteen. In contrast, Bagley, Bolitho, and Bertrand (1997) found that only 23% of their sample of 1,025 adolescent women from western Canada had experienced sexual assault. These authors noted, however, that the questionnaire used in their study asked about "more serious" dimensions of sexual harassment, including sexual assault.

Behaviours associated with sexual harassment are often dismissed as "boys will be boys," or "it's just a joke." This "unacknowledged face of violence" is, in reality, a major factor in the social construction of male power and control. As such, it is a phenomenon that cripples girls, boys, and their relations with themselves, others, and the world. Despite the deleterious effects on the health of girls, and boys, sexual harassment continues to flourish in all spheres of our society. As Rooney (1998) observed, through the refusal to acknowledge the significance of sexual harassment in the lives of girls and women, we are, in effect, condoning

more explicit forms of violence. In other words, "permission to sexually harass constitutes permission to go further" (p. 5).

During the past four years, the Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence* has been conducting a national participatory research project related to violence prevention and the 'girl child' (Berman & Jiwani, 2002; Jiwani et al., 1999). The theoretical and methodological perspectives that have guided this work are a synthesis of ideas from participatory action research and feminist research. A fundamental assumption of this framework is that an understanding of violence in the lives of girls requires that we attend to their "lived experiences," but further, that we critically examine these within the broader context of social, political, and cultural structures and policies that allow violence to flourish. A second premise upon which this work is based is that all girls are likely to encounter violence at various points in their lives. Given the pervasive and insidious nature of many forms of violence, including sexual harassment, all girls must be considered to be vulnerable and "at risk." It is also recognized, however, that differing social identities, including race, class, ability, sexual orientation and age, will significantly influence the way in which violence is experienced and understood.

Each of the five centres focused on a different aspect of violence, but a shared objective was to examine the diverse ways in which girls and young women are socialized to accept or expect violence in their lives and strategies they use to negotiate the violence they encounter. A second objective was to consider how existing policies impede or sustain this process, and to put forth recommendations for programming and policy directed toward the prevention of violence. The research conducted by the Centre For Research on Violence Against Women and Children in London, Ontario focused on the problem of sexual harassment. Based on findings from focus groups conducted with girls and community leaders during the first phase of this project (Berman et al., 2000), it became evident to us that sexual harassment is one of the most prevalent and widely tolerated forms of violence affecting young girls. Thus, a central aim of this research was to increase our understanding of the interactive effects of sexual harassment and everyday violence on the well-being of girls and young women. The purpose of this paper is to present this component of the project, with particular attention to the influence of sexual harassment on girls' developing sense of self, and to discuss the implications of this research for counsellors who are working with this population in a variety of contexts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several scholars have addressed the development of girls' sense of self, and have described many challenges and barriers that girls face in this process.

* The Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence consists of: The FREDA Centre in Vancouver, BC; the RESOLVE Centre in Winnipeg, MB, Saskatoon, SK and Calgary, AL; the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children in London, ON; the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre in Fredericton, NB; and the CRI-VIFF in Montreal, QC.

According to Miller (1991), the self-esteem of girls and young women arises from a feeling that they are connected to relationships and that they are "taking care" of those relationships. This idea is in contrast to dominant developmental perspectives in which emotional development is associated with increasing degrees of separation and individuation (Erikson, 1963). Miller further commented that her conceptualization of self-esteem is a departure from more commonly held definitions and is, thus, not measured on any of the standard instruments as such. According to Miller, "agency" may be viewed as the capacity to perceive and use one's powers in every conceivable sense. Of particular significance, Miller maintains that girls are not free to use all of their powers because of societal expectations that they must defer to other people's needs and desires.

Pipher (1994) elaborated upon this idea and described "authenticity" as owning all of one's experiences, including any emotions and thoughts that may not be socially acceptable. Since self-esteem is based on the acceptance of one's thoughts and feelings, girls learn that they must disown parts of themselves. According to Pipher, girls are trained to be "feminine," to be evaluated on their appearance, to be less than who they really are, and to be what the culture wants them to be. As she wrote, "America is a girl-destroying place. Everywhere girls are encouraged to sacrifice their true selves" (p.44).

This "denial of self" among adolescent girls was addressed by Brown (1991) who asserted that girls, aged 10-12, make great efforts to be the author of their life stories and to hold on to what they know. When others will not listen, these girls will sometimes talk about their anxieties, fears and vulnerabilities to another person who respects their experience. When they reach adolescence, Brown notes that these same young women begin to devalue what they feel and think about relationships. They strive to become the conventional, idealized woman. As Gilligan (1991) stated, there is a clear message to adolescent girls to "cover up" — their bodies, their feelings, their relationships, their knowing, their voice and their desires.

Few studies have been published regarding the distinct ways in which sexual harassment intervenes to shape girls' development. However, Larkin (1994) observed a tendency among adolescent girls to become increasingly desensitized to sexual harassment. This desensitization is the result of repeated and chronic exposure to this form of violence and contributes to girls' inability to identify and name verbal forms of abuse. Instead, girls typically limit their definitions of abuse to rape and other more explicit forms of violence. The net result of this process is to further minimize and conceal the everyday experiences of violence in girls' lives.

Robinson (1991) described North American culture as one which denies the reality of poverty, sexism, racism, and sexual abuse, yet glorifies violence and inadequately prepares girls to resist their subtle [and overt] oppression. From Pipher's (1994) perspective, we live in a culture that exerts pressure on girls through schools, magazines, music, television, advertisements, movies and peers

to leave their true, authentic selves in adolescence and to develop false, scripted selves in order to be socially accepted and thus expose themselves to vulnerability. To counter this process, Pipher proposes that girls need to explore the impact of their culture upon their growth and development, that is, to engage in a consciousness-raising process in order to develop resistance by making conscious, responsible choices for their true selves.

The negation and trivialization of girls' experiences, and their diminishing sense of selves, appears to be intensified by inappropriate responses on the part of trusted adults in whom girls confide. Gropper and Froschl (2000) reported that many children believe that adults who witness the abuse fail to respond in helpful ways. Craig, Henderson, and Murphy (2000) found that teachers are more likely to respond to physical aggression, which can be more readily defined as bullying, than to verbal aggression, suggesting a tacit endorsement of the latter. Stein (1995) also reported that girls expect adults who witness their sexual harassment to interpret these violations as they do. However, their experiences are not validated by school personnel because most of the adults do not label these behaviours as "sexual harassment." Stein likens these girls' situations to battered women who are not believed or helped by persons in authority and are left feeling alone and abandoned.

From this review of relevant literature, it is evident that girls encounter sexual harassment throughout their young lives in a cultural context that historically has disregarded their gender. Further, this cultural environment is characterized by a devaluing of adolescent girls' sense of self to the point where they question the "truth" of their lived experiences. The lack of responsiveness on the part of significant adults in the lives of girls contributes to the silencing and negating of their experiences, thereby further eroding their developing sense of self. How this pattern is enacted when violence is an integral part of everyday life for girls has received little scholarly attention.

METHOD

In order to elicit information about deeply personal, and sometimes troubling, issues, we believed that it was important to use approaches that were simultaneously sensitive to the needs of the participants, and that were creative and potentially empowering. We, therefore, selected innovative strategies for data collection that afforded girls an opportunity to convey their stories and thoughts about the violence in their lives using their own words, poems, pictures, and so forth. More specifically, we used three methods, namely focus groups and either journal completion or photo novella.

Participants

The sample consisted of 268 participants, aged 8 to 18 years. With respect to the different study methods, 167 participated in focus groups (104 females and 63 males); 101 (61 females and 40 males) also completed journals ($n = 44$) or

photo novella ($n = 57$). The decision to include boys in this study facilitated our examination of the gendered nature of violence, and is consistent with our view of gender as a social relationship and a feature of everyone's life. An examination of gender requires that we pay attention to the lives of girls *and* boys, and that we examine how male power is used against boys, as well as how boys embody it. To better understand the nature of girls' experiences with respect to sexual harassment, and how it is created and acted upon, we selected participants from a wide array of lifestyle, socio-economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. Participants were recruited from schools and community agencies, organizations, and neighbourhood settings. Ethnicity, as identified by the participants, was as follows: Canadian 50%, European 20%, Vietnamese 15%, Black 3%, Filipino 3%, Hispanic 2%, Somali 2%, Middle Eastern 2% and Native/Aboriginal 1%. The boys and girls reported that they were living with parents who were married (72%), separated or divorced (25%), or with neither biological parent (3%). Interestingly, many participants did not know their parents' education or occupation.

Procedure

Focus groups were conducted by research assistants trained in feminist research methods and aware of the issues regarding violence. The focus groups were conducted with approximately 10-14 youth per session in gender-segregated groups and were held at schools during class time and in other community settings. The primary purpose of the focus groups was to explore how sexual harassment was defined and experienced, and reflected our view that group discussions were likely to yield different information than individual interviews. As well, it was believed that focus groups would provide an opportunity for participants to share their collective experiences, to name the violence in their lives and to explore strategies for change.

The journal, developed for this study, is a semi-structured booklet which includes questions and open-ended statements. Examples from the journal are: "I feel like I am part of the crowd when . . . "; "I feel left out when . . . "; "I feel harassed when . . . "; "I feel happy when . . . "; "I feel sad when . . . "; "Girls are nice/mean to me when . . . "; and "Boys are nice/mean to me when" Several blank pages allowed the participants to add anything else they wanted to share but that was not previously addressed. Journals were completed during a two-week period after which an in-depth interview was conducted. In this interview, which was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, the journal was used as a basis for discussing the participants' understandings, experiences, and feelings with regard to gender-based violence and with particular attention to sexual harassment.

Those who chose photo novella were given a disposable camera and asked to take pictures of important people, places, and events in their everyday lives over a two-week period. Unlike studies in which investigators have used photographs to depict aspects of human experience from the vantage point of the photographer, photo novella, which means "picture stories," allows the participants to tell their stories from their own perspectives. As used in the present study,

participants were allowed to make their own decisions about what photographs to include or exclude, thereby controlling the images of their everyday worlds that they wished to present. The photos were then used during an in-depth interview as a vehicle for discussing the meaning of the pictures in a dialogic process we have termed "photo talk" (Berman, Ford-Gilboe, Moutrey, & Cekic, 2001). This interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Throughout the conduct of this research, we strove to create a safe and participatory atmosphere, enhancing the likelihood that participants would openly engage in dialogue with the researchers. In this manner, we were able to capture the subtle and explicit forms of sexual harassment, the reactions harassment evokes in girls and young women, and their understandings as to why it occurs. Finally, we explored with participants their ideas regarding how to address and eliminate the manifestations of everyday violence in the lives of girls.

Analysis of Data

The data collection strategies yielded narrative data that were examined and analysed for common themes and areas of divergence by members of the research team. This team consisted of the three authors, as well as a research coordinator with a Master's degree in library science and a community researcher who is a counsellor in a sexual assault centre. The inductive analysis was carried out using interpretive techniques for the analysis of narrative data that were suggested by Mishler (1986) and Riessman (1993). Although the process was recursive and cyclical, it is best conceptualized as a series of steps. The first step entailed reading and re-reading the transcripts from the focus groups, the in-depth interviews, and the journals to gain a sense of the whole and the particular, and to begin to identify underlying patterns across stories. Simultaneously, the critical components of the story, namely orientation, plot, evaluation, and resolution, were extracted. Although not all narratives include all of these elements, and rules for demarcating boundaries cannot be rigidly applied, it provided a useful starting point.

Because narratives are often lengthy, it is necessary to develop a systematic means of reduction (Riessman, 1993). Mishler (1986) refers to this process as a reduction to the core narrative, a means of rendering the "whole story" into a condensed version that allows for comparison and interpretation. The final stage involved the analysis of story content and context. The participants' stories were closely examined, with careful attention paid to the children's experiences with respect to sexual harassment, the feelings expressed, the environmental context, participants' responses to the violence they faced, and their interpretations of what occurred to them. Consistent with feminist research approaches, finding meaning entailed a process of negotiation, with tentative findings being discussed and revised in collaboration with groups of girls and boys, as well as with community researchers and activists.

RESULTS

The pervasive and gendered nature of sexual harassment in the lives of girls was clearly evident among all age groups. Because the violence was not always

explicit, however, it was not commonly identified as such. Patterns emerged where it became clear that girls were reluctant to deal directly with the harasser and the theme of “just joking” percolated throughout the girls’ stories as a way of helping them to minimize their emotional responses to sexual harassment. Many of the girls doubted themselves, questioned whether their experiences were valid, and did not trust that their “normal” responses to harassing behaviours were well-founded.

The discussion that follows will focus on the findings from this project with respect to the ways in which sexual harassment shapes girls’ developing sense of self. Three themes are presented: (a) Experiences and understandings of sexual harassment; (b) Coping strategies: Resistance, alliances, and allegiances, and (c) Sexual harassment and the sense of self.

Experiences and Understandings of Sexual Harassment

Understandings regarding sexual harassment showed considerable variation among participants at different ages. Many children in the younger age group, ages 8-10 years, acknowledged that they had “heard about it,” but were unable to articulate a clear definition of sexual harassment. Most commonly, they would describe an assortment of behaviours such as bullying, teasing, being picked on or name-calling. As one nine-year-old stated:

[I am teased about] my hair, my face. When they tease you about the colour of your skin or the colour of your eyes or what you’re wearing or how tall you are. Like where you come from... They want to be like that so they just bully you and they feel better.

According to many of those we interviewed, the schoolyards were a common site for the enactment of gendered-based violence, with clearly demarcated divisions between the “in group” and “the outsiders.” Several girls described the need for protection from their friends, “bodyguards,” or authority figures. The media, including television, movies, music videos, and the internet, appeared to have a significant influence on the girls’ notions of violence. One ten-year-old girl described a hypothetical situation where a woman could be abducted, forced to take drugs, made to strip, and have pictures taken of her which were subsequently put on the internet.

Youth who ranged in age from 11 to 14 years were more able to describe concrete incidents of harassing behaviours and could differentiate physical, emotional, and verbal harassment. This group was more familiar with violence-related terminology through the school’s antibullying curriculum. However, most girls viewed the harassing behaviours as an integral and expected facet of growing up, and maintained that they were neither surprised nor disturbed at the extent to which these behaviours occurred.

The older participants, 15-18 years of age, were typically able to describe features of sexual harassment that were consistent with Larkin’s (1994) definition. In particular, they were keenly aware that sexual harassment included behaviours that were unwanted, unwelcome, and persistent. Their examples were distinctly

related to sexual harassment rather than teasing or bullying. As one 15-year-old female participant in a focus group stated:

I think when a person takes offence to it deeply, especially sexual harassment, that's the invasion of personal space . . . if it's a constant everyday thing it would be harassment, not like just if someone teases me one day and then the next day it's over and done with, to me that wouldn't be harassment, it would just kind of be teasing.

Consistent with earlier research, sexual harassment was experienced in all venues, including schools, playgrounds, neighbourhoods, as well as in their homes. Several girls spoke about sibling rivalry when they were discussing their family life. In contrast to dominant views of sibling rivalry as relatively innocuous behaviour, numerous girls told of incidents that resulted in physical injury. As with other forms of violence, however, there was a sense among the girls that sibling rivalry was a 'normal' and expected facet of family life.

In school settings, sexual harassment appeared to be particularly pervasive and included harassment inflicted by students toward other students, but also by teachers toward students. While there is a widespread presumption that schools provide a safe setting for students to learn, our data showed that classrooms and schoolyards had the potential to become toxic environments for girls where the atmosphere was charged with sexism and racism. Several girls reported incidents, initiated by male teachers, of unwanted touching such as rubbing a girl's back or shoulder, flirting, and looking at a girl's chest instead of her face. The perception among the girls was that they had little recourse to report these situations because the repercussions to themselves might be more difficult to handle than the actual offence.

Sexual harassment appeared to extend beyond the schools and families and was a common feature of community life. In the words of one 12-year-old female, "When I'm walking down the street and people look at me like that, and you're just walking and they're staring at you, then you get kind of scared." For some of the older female participants, there seemed to be a cognitive dissonance that occurred in response to harassment. Despite the knowledge that certain behaviours were not acceptable, the frequency with which they occurred suggested that the girls should not protest. This "normalizing" of sexual harassment and the perception that the girls are perhaps responsible for the behaviour, is evident in this lament by a 15-year-old female. "I kind of felt bad because in the beginning I was flirting with him, that maybe it was my fault for doing that . . . I kind of felt violated, gross kind of. Just like 'stay away' kind of thing."

Coping Strategies: Resistance, Alliances and Allegiances

While descriptions of sexually harassing incidents were abundant, what was also apparent was the resilience of girls to rebound through various ways, some that would enhance their sense of self and some that would detract. In either case, the girls developed methods of responding that somehow eased the negative feelings associated with being sexually harassed.

Resistance. Resistance is often viewed in a negative way and refers to a tendency for individuals to balk at moving toward a goal or block efforts to change.

However, resistance may be conceptualized as a positive characteristic in that it may honour a girl's experience and her ability to develop strategies to manage the feelings associated with being sexually harassed.

A predominant theme in our findings was the notion that many harassing behaviours were construed as "just joking." Joking was a form of teasing that was commonly accepted among groups of friends. Girls would endure various forms of joking to maintain status and acceptance with peers and friends. Smiling and laughing were also common strategies used to conceal feelings of vulnerability. The two dichotomous options of laughing or getting angry effectively established "the nice girl versus the bitch" polarization. Being the "nice girl" served to cover up the true, authentic self in favour of the socially acceptable self. The role of the "bitch" was the "appropriate," though less socially desirable, response that allowed the expression of true feelings. This latter role also entailed the likelihood of social isolation which, from the perspective of adolescent girls, is the worst possible outcome. As one girl who had participated in a focus group noted: "At our school, there's a lot of guys that joke around and they always start spreading rumours about you and like you kind of try to understand that they are people that like to joke around, so we just go along with it and we laugh about it."

Another act of resistance described by the participants was the development of skills that were employed to deal directly with sexual harassment. One 14-year-old female indicated that she was taught useful strategies in one of her health units.

Like when you deal with people that confront you, there's like specific methods that you are supposed to use, if they don't like you anymore. You have to be assertive, you can't be passive or aggressive. You have to look them in the eye and talk in a firm voice and sound confident.

Reporting the harassment to adults in positions of authority, including teachers, parents, or police, is a strategy that may be understood as a path to resistance, and that is potentially empowering to girls. However, when used by participants in this research, the results were often unsatisfactory. In a few instances the response on the part of adults helped to validate girls' experiences and led to some type of reprimand directed to those who had harassed them. More commonly, though, this type of response appeared to be the exception rather than the norm. According to many girls, attempts to report were met by adults who minimized the incident, invoked platitudes such as "boys will be boys," or admonished the girls who were on the receiving end of sexual harassment. According to one 15-year-old female, "It was very upsetting . . . it was like almost every day of the week I was harassed. I talked to the teacher about it and they said there wasn't really anything they could do about it." Similarly, in a focus group of 11- to 15-year-old girls, one participant explained:

[When people gossip about me] I'd feel upset and I would feel like a loser . . . and sometimes people cry a lot because of what people say because they think it's true, they find it true, and it's hard to forget. And parents think that kids can just walk away from it. It's pretty hard when it's all over the school and you're standing right in the middle of it.

From these comments, the manner by which girls' sense of self is diminished is clear. Through repeated minimization and negation of sexual harassment on the

part of trusted adults, girls' lived experiences are questioned, challenged, negated, and denied.

Alliances and allegiances. Cultivating a diverse network of friends was a key strategy for developing safety. Girls frequently expressed their fears of finding themselves alone when passing by their harassers in the streets or hallways of schools. Having a peer group also gave girls the sense of being supported and shielded from rumours and feeling alone. A 14-year-old girl shared this comment regarding her close friends. "They're like always there for me, any time I need the person or need to talk about something. We do like everything together"

As this and other similar remarks demonstrate, girls derived comfort in their ability to share feelings of anxiety and hurt without being judged negatively by their peers. At times, they were able to confront one another or to challenge their friends regarding teasing. "Hanging out" with the "right" people was also deemed important because it was difficult to determine whom to trust. In a focus group conducted with 16-year-old girls, it was revealed that a member of the group had been sexually assaulted. The group's response was that they should attend parties with a "guy" who they knew, believing that this strategy would afford the necessary protection. There was no awareness of the possibility of date/acquaintance rape and the prevailing attitude was, "It's never going to happen to me."

Sexual Harassment and the Sense of Self

Concerns about physical appearance appeared to be closely linked to girls' self-image, a concern not expressed by the boys. Girls repeatedly described efforts to change various aspects of themselves, with particular attention to hair, body size, and athletic ability. The dominant belief was that such changes influenced their encounters with harassing behaviour. This notion was supported by a 15-year-old who said, "I don't try to, I don't wear makeup anymore. I just don't do anything to give the guy even the slightest thought that I might be flirting with him." In this manner, her sense of self diminishes as she feels compelled to become, not who she wants to be, but someone who puts on a facade to fit the prescribed mould. From her perspective, the onus is on her to prevent the harassment rather than on the harasser to change his behaviour.

The girls were unanimous in the fact that all had experienced, witnessed, or heard about some form of harassment, yet there was no indication of a gendered analysis of this phenomenon. As articulated by the girls, it would seem that these incidents were enacted in a cultural vacuum, and that they were the expected norms of our society. As a result of this normalization process, girls' constant exposure to the various forms of violence became less overtly visible. When girls began to feel confused, angry, hurt, violated, sad, depressed, or disrespected as a result of sexual harassment, they often questioned their responses and doubted the accuracy of their perceptions. Their self-confidence was steadily eroded and their capacity to mask their feelings grew. While "boys will be boys" has been described as the adage for boys, "being nice" became the motto for adolescent girls. As one girl stated, "My sister would be teased too so she tried to be nice . . . so I learned

from that, not to be mean to people even if they're being mean to you, try to be nice." For a small number of participants, contrary messages were also offered as one girl revealed. "My dad is always telling me that I shouldn't be nice to people who are mean to me and that I should just ignore them and not even talk to them and just be myself and just care about myself and my family and everything."

Occasionally, girls developed rules for their relationships that served to denigrate themselves. For example: "I don't want to be a burden to my friends with my problems, but I like them to talk to me about theirs. It's kind of a double standard." Yet there were some voices that somehow managed to stay strong:

I have started to get the attitude that I don't really care about what other people think of me. I think that's kind of a good thing to do because if I'm always worried about what other people think, then I'm not doing what I want.

The double standard operates in other ways to erode a young girl's self-esteem. Girls spoke of brothers who had different accountability rules in the household. Girls were to report details of their social lives while boys were required to reveal little as to their whereabouts. As one 15-year-old girl commented: "Well since he's a guy, and my parents supposedly think that he's allowed to go anywhere he wants and be at home at what time [he wants]. And he's younger than me, so that really ticks me off, too."

DISCUSSION

The stories shared by the girls in this research reveal how physical and sexual characteristics converge to produce a sexual commentary that permeates the social and private life of girls. Typically, girls attempt to depersonalize this sexualized social environment by focussing on how the behaviour stems from roles that boys and girls assume in their pursuit of "being cool" and accepted.

The girls' narratives reveal the personal injury that arises from the sense of disrespect and violation they experience as a result of constant exposure to pervasive, gender-based harassment. Normalized both formally and informally, the personal nature of the intimidation ensures it will "get in," reinforcing girls' experience of their limited power to change their environment. More frequently they try to change themselves to accommodate an environment of sexual harassment. This increases the inner and outer magnitude of their oppression if we consider the rebound effect of rendering violence less visible. Taking a stance of silence, minimizing, resisting individual blame, and 'being nice,' does allow one to gain a degree of personal power and safety, yet it also reduces the legitimate arena in which girls may censure, denounce, or even define, the gendered nature of the violence. Still, "negotiating acceptable degrees of violence" is a normative response that emerged in virtually every interview and focus group.

Girls reported a wide range of implicit and explicit behaviours that violated their sense of physical, emotional, cognitive, and psychological integrity. Many reported feeling implicitly harassed and intimidated by groups of boys who stared,

or taunted them about body size or parts, in casual encounters or as they walked by. This sense of being watched or assessed by the opposite sex was rarely mentioned by boys. The gendered nature of verbal harassment was evident in the name calling (girls being called bitches, whores, sluts), the rumours about sexual behaviour, and the competitiveness among girls that manifests in relational aggression.

From the narratives we see that, regardless of gender, violence is actualized consistently through social actors and institutions which direct access to, and use of, power in the public domain. Sexual harassment is anchored in social structures that provide a combination of constraints and opportunities for power, and thus action. At minimum, the persistence of this pattern points to its structured nature. From our research, we can better comprehend how this pattern results in the normalization of personal and vicarious exposure to sexual harassment, which is largely unrecognized in policies, legislation, and programs that influence the current and future potential of girls and boys, young women and young men. Normalization is assured by the lack of recognition of the multiple forms of violence and by the lack of meaningful response on the part of those with legitimate authority. It disrupts the lives of boys and girls, but is more restrictive in its impact on girls. Structured violence ensures that daily turbulence, although anticipated, creates a conundrum in terms of appropriate response. The conundrum relates to how sexual harassment, with its attendant accommodations, is normalized in the lives of girls.

Implications for Counsellors

In view of the pervasive nature of violence in society, it is imperative that there be clear guidelines regarding how best to counsel young women who have the courage to reach out for help. Research findings indicate that having even one adult with whom girls can talk, and from whom they can receive understanding and acceptance, provides a powerful buffer in dealing with challenging issues (Gilligan, 1991; Pipher, 1994). Counsellors are in a key position to offer support, build strength, and increase understanding of violence and how it impacts girls' lives. Based on the findings of this research, and building on the ideas of Carol Gilligan, Mary Pipher, and Lyn Mikel Brown, we propose the following five areas as critical in working with girls: validation; nonjudgement; coping strategies; the importance of the cultural context; and lastly, resistance and empowerment.

Validation. Girls need and want the opportunity to tell their own stories, in their own words. This telling is not only a means to empowerment, but also provides counsellors with opportunities to understand and validate girls' experiences. Validation can be achieved through active listening, empathic responses, and support. Active listening is crucial, not only within the therapeutic relationship, but also in fostering self-esteem and a sense of worth (McKay & Fanning, 2000). Within the counselling context, not interrupting, or imposing 'adultcentric' or androcentric biases on her story can prove helpful in allowing the telling of the story. Remembering details such as names of friends, family members, favourite music, or interests, convey that girls are listened to and are important. Empathic

responses can also be validating in the sense that girls feel understood, something many girls in the study reported they often did not perceive. Finally, offering support can take many forms and many include acting as an advocate with parents, teachers, or school administration.

Nonjudgement. The girls in this study were surprisingly pessimistic about the predictability of adults to affirm their experiences of violence and harassment. Many girls told stories about approaching various adults including teachers, principals, and parents and finding themselves chastised or even punished for telling, or for their "reactive behaviour" to the harassment. Understandably, girls were increasingly doubtful that adults would act as viable protectors or change agents on their behalf. Thus, having someone whom girls can trust and know will not blame them is crucial. Assigning blame or passing negative judgements often results in girls not fully engaging in the counselling process, or terminating the therapeutic relationship altogether. Being able to listen without judgement or blame, requires that counsellors be aware of their own stereotypes and biases, and how these impact their work.

Coping strategies. Findings from this study indicate that laughing it off, minimizing the harm, or ignoring the behaviour were common coping strategies. Talking with girls about these responses provides an opportunity for girls to gain insight into how sexual harassment is affecting them. One of the conflicts girls face in finding ways to cope is the dilemma between speaking their truth and being accepted by their peers. The therapeutic relationship can be a place in which this often crippling double-bind can be explored. Counsellors can support girls in finding their voice and allowing them to speak their truth freely and clearly. In addition, counsellors can draw out girls' strengths in how they have been coping, further honouring their experience and helping to brainstorm about other possible solutions.

Importance of a cultural context. Sexual harassment is about power, not sex. Therefore, a useful strategy is talking to children and youth, in an age appropriate manner, about power, gender roles, gender stereotypes, and the profound impact of patriarchal culture. Helping girls to name their experiences of sexual harassment as violence, and to view this violence as part of a larger societal problem, helps to minimize self-blame and isolation. Clearly naming the problem is a necessary step in healing the damage done to the sense of self. Offering information about the gendered nature of violence allows for increased understanding of violence, as well as for additional coping strategies and ways to resist.

Empowerment and resistance. Empowerment is one of the best ways to deal with harassment (Schwarz, 2000) and can be an achievable goal within the context of therapy. Teaching and encouraging resistance is also a useful strategy (Berman et al., 2000). Gilligan (1982), from a feminist perspective, describes resistance as a strength, an indication of physical and emotional health. Resistance can take many forms such as speaking out against sexual harassment, confronting a perpetrator or confiding in a trusted adult. Resistance itself is empowering, as it involves maintaining one's voice and speaking one's truth. Counsellors are in an

ideal position to foster relationships with girls in which empowerment and resistance can be learned.

In order for girls to be safe, they need to have spaces that are their own, that are controlled by them, and where they are free to examine their feelings and experiences, and devise strategies for overcoming and resisting the violence in their lives. Programs are needed that incorporate a gender-based analysis of the challenges girls face. Too often, programs are designed to promote self-esteem or enhanced communication, without recognition of the significant role of gender (Haskell, 1998). These efforts have merit, but they may contribute to the mistaken notion that violence occurs because of miscommunication or lack of assertiveness on the part of the girl. Further, these programs inadvertently hold girls responsible for the violence, implying that they can stop it by becoming more assertive. While counsellors have a significant role to play in the elimination of sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence, ultimately a collaborative effort is needed that includes educators, health and social service professionals, parents, and all others who interact with girls and boys.

CONCLUSION

In this research, we have examined the influence of sexual harassment on girls' developing sense of self. In contrast to traditional psychological perspectives that focus on the individual, we believe that the self exists within a social context. While the stories told by the girls are their own, each with their own particularities and shaped by their unique experiences, their stories are also organized by gender so that each girls' story is also every girls' story.

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