

# **PREVENTING ADULT SEXUAL ASSAULT: VIOLENCE, GENDER AND POWER, AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATION**

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While on yard duty I saw three boys (Year Two) taking the pants off a girl (Year Two) in the sand pit. I rushed to tell the principal and he said 'Now, now boys will be boys!' (First year out teacher, in Clark 1989, p.12).

THE AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR THE UNDER-standing of violence against women, in order for schools to develop preventative approaches, including policies, strategies and materials, to reduce and prevent violence, in particular violence against women.

Violence, violence against women, violence against girls, and the construction of gender and its relationship to violence will be considered. The role that the education system plays in either challenging or accepting the status quo will then be addressed.

It is now well-established that gender is a factor when examining violence. Two significant issues have emerged from the research and data collection within the last decade—the majority of violent crime is committed by men, about 98 per cent; and the majority of violent crime against women is committed by men they know.

We know that women are more at risk from a man they know well than from a stranger. In a study of reported rapes in Victoria, it was found that 61 per cent of victims who reported the rape to police were known to their offender (Victorian Community Council Against Violence 1991). We must ask ourselves:

- why is it that men are more likely to commit violent crime than women? and
- why is it that women are more likely to be raped, injured or killed by a man they know?

To have a clearer understanding of this phenomenon we need to consider what status our society has given to violence, to women (and children), to men and importantly, what is the connection between these three?

### Attitudes Towards Violence

To explore this further the construction of gender, in particular the construction of masculinity and its relationship to violence against women, needs to be examined.

Elliott & Shannahan (1988), in their research on family violence for the Office of the Status of Women, found that the prevailing attitude is that one in five people (20 per cent) believed that it is okay to hit your wife in *some circumstances*. Table 1 lists these circumstances; they are located in beliefs about appropriate behaviour for women, and the right of men to chastise their wives.

Table 1

#### Circumstances in which Physical Force Against Wife Considered Acceptable

Circumstances	% Who Agree
Argues with or refuses to obey him	2
Wastes money	2
Does not keep house clean	2
Does not have meals ready on time	1
Keeps nagging him	3
Admits to sleeping with another man	11
One or more of the above circumstances	14
At least one circumstance	19

Source: Elliott & Shannahan 1988.

What is obvious about these factors is that they all relate to what is considered to be gendered behaviours; that is, women keeping the house clean, cooking meals and so on. They all focus on her behaviour and his assessment as to whether she has behaved appropriately or completed a task to his level of satisfaction, and an approved use of violence.

## **Power and Violence**

According to Dobash and Dobash, men learn the appropriate contexts in which to use violence 'through a male culture that condones and encourages violence'. In their research they found that:

In the violent events experienced by women . . . violence was used by the men they lived with to silence them, to 'win' arguments, to express dissatisfaction, to deter future behaviour and to merely demonstrate dominance (Family Violence Professional Education Taskforce 1991, p. 116).

An aspect of this control is manifested in the traditional notion of women being the chattels of men which is still held by many, and this view directly impacts on the way women and girls are responded to by the legal system, the social system and economic and cultural systems. It accounts for society's resistance to acknowledge that violence against women is criminal behaviour. It should be remembered that it is only recently that we have had a significant change in the legal status of women: for example, in Victoria, it has only been since 1985 that marriage could not be used as a defence for a man who was accused of raping his wife.

The attitudes and values that underlie adult behaviour are not suddenly formed when a person turns twenty-one, but are shaped and informed from childhood. When we consider the beliefs that underlie violence against women and in particular sexual assault, they too have been shaped from the earliest of years. We see these attitudes being constructed in many ways, by the social, legal, cultural, political, economic and historical factors which influence our lives. They are reinforced daily, in our education system, in our many activities and interactions and in particular in the way we respond to boys and their behaviour, and in the way we respond to girls and their behaviour, and the gender roles we assign to them. Much of these attitudes are based on the constructions of masculinity and femininity and the gender roles which they prescribe. Their influence on our earliest experiences are so entrenched in our behaviour as to be unquestioned. According to Clark: 'the power relations between males and females, where men are in charge, where boys chase and girls run, appear as normal' (Clark 1989, p. 25).

The beliefs that underlie sexual assault and violence against women are the same attitudes that underlie sexual harassment and violence against girls. Just as there has been a resistance to recognise violence against women as criminal behaviour, there has also been resistance to describe many of the behaviours directed towards girls and young women as violence. Much of the violence that girls currently experience at the hands of boys is dismissed as boys being boys or, worse, as normal behaviour. This is evidenced in the way in which the legal system traditionally defines and responds to women who have experienced violence and is paralleled in the way in which the education system defines and responds to girls who experience violence at school. Both help to maintain and legitimise male violence.

Kelly (1987) introduces the concept of a continuum of sexual violence. This paradigm is intended to highlight the fact that sexual violence exists in most women's lives, while the form it takes, how women define the events and its impact on them at the time, and over time, varies. The continuum does not relate to a linear straight line.

It is useful to use the concept of a continuum to understand the relationship between violence against women, and violence against girls. The common elements consist of:

- male attitudes towards women and girls that is expressed not only in forms of violence but in many forms of coercion and control; and
- the experience of that violence and its impact for women and girls are similar.

### **Experiences of Girls in School**

This paper will now draw on current research in primary schools and secondary schools to illustrate the commonalities. In *Listening to Girls* (Australian Education Council 1991) female students were interviewed on a range of their schooling experiences. First, at a primary school, ten Year Six students were discussing their relationship with boys:

They call you slut and I don't like it.

The teachers don't do nothing about the boys, and say don't worry, but its a bit hard.

All the girls have nick names—Broccoli, Juice Bag, Ugly, Whorebag. They call us all Dog . . .

Boys tease you about your period, breasts and what's going to happen to you. If they can they flick your bra strap. We tease back but they start it. They say look at her she's a dog. They pat their leg and say come here (Australian Education Council 1991, p. 6).

In this research, the authors note that the girls believed that boys do not like girls. In fact, they thought that boys despise girls. The feeling was not mutual, they said. They seemed puzzled as to why the boys were the way they were (Australian Education Council 1991, p. 7).

The second range of experiences are from girls in a country high school where there were only fourteen female students in Year seven and only eight in Year eight. The girls apparently felt strongly about the harassment they endured from day to day and they felt powerless to change things. Their comments included:

They call you dog and make comments about your body like 'Gee you've got big ones'. You get sick of it.

The boys 'dak' you (they pull your pants down). I think its disgusting. We stand against walls or sit down so they can't get you.

Some say 'Will you come to bed with me?'. They come up close and grab you and they make crank calls. At the start of the year we had to give our phone numbers out loud and the boys wrote it down (Australian Education Council 1991, pp. 7–8).

As the researchers were leaving, one student turned back and said

I know that you said this was confidential so we could tell you anything and that you wouldn't comment to staff on the things we said . . . But couldn't you just drop some hints about the dakking. It really is awful and we would like it to stop (Australian Education Council 1991, p. 8).

Many girls were identifying violence at the hands of boys, and in particular sexual violence. They described their experiences as humiliating, upsetting and degrading. The dominant school culture defined girls experiences and dismissed them with responses such as 'boys being boys' as if it was to be expected for boys to harass and intimidate girls.

Clark (1989, pp. 41–2) describes behaviour in primary schools where 'girls [are] being held down and kissed, dragged into the boys toilets, having their dresses flicked up, girls being chased etc'. She claims that, for boys, these sexual practices are connected with having power and dominance over girls, and the girls experience it as domination and sometimes violence. She also goes on to say that one of the problems is that this behaviour of boys is often not recognised as sexual harassment but as teasing.

A number of girls identified that a way to avoid male teasing and harassment was to have a boyfriend to protect them. In these experiences there were only two ways for boys to then relate to girls; either as perpetrators of violence or as protectors against (male) violence.

### **What Happens when the Protector Becomes the Perpetrator?**

In Queensland, a survey amongst fourteen-year-old boys was undertaken (Domestic Violence Resource Centre (Qld) 1992). The survey asked about attitudes towards the use of male violence (sexual) against girls. A total of 187 boys were surveyed in a number of schools in the Brisbane metropolitan area. They were asked 'Is it OK for a boy to hold a girl down and force her to have sexual intercourse if . . .' and a number of circumstances were presented.

The boys were given a choice of three responses to each category: 'No', 'Yes', and 'Unsure'. The Brisbane Domestic Violence Resource Centre claimed that the results were *alarming*. One in three boys (32.6 per cent) believed it was okay for a boy to hold a girl down and force her to have sexual intercourse if she led him on. Less than half (49 per cent) believed that leading a boy on did not justify forced sexual intercourse. The next highest categories were:

- she gets him sexually excited (27.3 per cent);
- they have dated a long time (15 per cent); and
- she lets him touch her above the waist (11.8 per cent).

Significant numbers of boys were *unsure* as to whether these circumstances justified forced sexual intercourse. The following indicate the percentage who were unsure as to whether this was OK under the following circumstances:

- she has led him on (18.7 per cent);
- she gets him sexually excited (17.6 per cent); and
- she lets him touch her above the waist (12.8 per cent).

There was not one category in which there was a unanimous 'No; it is not okay'. The survey findings indicate that:

- a percentage of boys believe it is OK to use violence against girls (to hold her down and force her to have sexual intercourse); and
- they are prepared to blame the girl for their (the boy's) sexual violence.

The myths that are perpetuated about adult violence against women are being absorbed into the boys' thinking, their behaviour and their rationalisations for their violent behaviour.

Across all schools there was a common belief (held by boys) *that girls often said no when they really meant yes*. A majority of boys also claimed that they could 'ascertain with some confidence when 'no' meant yes and when it meant 'no'. It seems that the boys did this on the basis of *'tone and volume of voice, facial expression and other non-verbal communication'*.

As can be seen, the attitudes that support male violence against women, and in particular sexual assault are already firmly entrenched in many of these responses. The researchers also found that:

many males had already engaged in behaviour that could be categorised as abusive, sexually harassing and demeaning of females. They lacked understanding that their behaviour may have been offensive or possibly even illegal (Domestic Violence Resource Centre (Qld) 1992, p. 4).

### **How Do We Prevent Male Violence Against Women?**

If we don't intervene we are allowing primary schools to be training grounds where the links between masculinity and violence become cemented (female primary teacher in Clark 1989, p. 28).

We collude in male violence against women by not addressing the very attitudes and behaviours that we see everyday in the school ground and in the community and pass off as children's behaviour. The boy who flashes himself in the school yard and has his behaviour laughed at will warrant arrest if he does it in ten years time. The boys who dak girls in the school yard, and have their behaviour dismissed, can be charged with assault in ten years time. The tolerance and acceptance of this type of violent behaviour is saying to boys that it is okay to do this and saying to girls that this is what you can expect to happen, and worse we will not help stop it.

There is a connection between boys' violence and the denigration of girls, when they are young, and domestic violence and gun shootings when they are older (male primary teacher in Clark 1989, p. 28).

One construction of masculinity assumes boys, and therefore men, are dominant, aggressive (physically and sexually), strong and powerful, and one construction of femininity assumes girls and therefore women to be (the opposite) submissive, passive, weak and powerless. There are many structural factors at work which reinforce this.

While both boys and girls are confined in regimes of masculinity and femininity (Connell 1987), it is not only determining how they behave but also how they will relate to each other. *These 'regimes' are not simply different from one another but express relations of power.* Gender equity, by creating an equality between men and women, boys and girls, and by reducing the power differential, is a central element in the long term prevention of violence against women. Gender equity is valuing women's and girls' experiences; gender equity is about women's and girls' safety.

Clark (1989) argues that within primary schools there are a range of practices that serve to give boys' interests, and boys' skills more status (than girls' interests and skills). They also unwittingly give boys access to forms of behaviour which make life very difficult for both women teachers and girls and which ensures that boys have greater power to define what goes on in the classroom or what is to be valued.

#### *Education has a role to play in addressing attitudes and behaviours*

Issues of violence against women cannot be adequately addressed unless sexism, power and gender inequality are challenged. The messages and signals that are given to girls and boys need to be questioned. We need to look closely at the factors that influence and determine their behaviour and their lives, from childhood into adulthood. We must begin with a recognition that:

- issues of power and gender are integral when discussing violence;
- in order to reduce violence, educational and social systems must promote gender equity and equality;
- violence should always be named for what it is. Violent behaviour should not be disguised as 'boys being boys' or as 'harmless fun' when there is clearly someone who is being made to feel unsafe or fearful because of that behaviour;
- violence is never acceptable behaviour, there is never any excuse for violence;
- violence can take many forms, including racist and sexist behaviour;

- the way in which schools address issues of violence and discipline will serve as role models to children; and
- many social and institutional structures themselves are often inequitable and violent.

We can apply these principles to the following areas:

- the development of policies and protocols in each school about violent behaviour and codes of behaviour; for example, a policy on sexual harassment that clearly identifies it as unacceptable;
- professional development to educate teachers and school support staff to recognise violence against girls and to feel confident in their ability to respond;
- curriculum should be used to foster equity; for example, the widespread use of gender inclusive curriculum; and
- promote curriculum that encourages equity and challenges racist and sexist attitudes and behaviours.

Teaching structures, methods and curricula need to be consistent in their approach. The learning that violence is unacceptable, as is gender and racial inequity, should be reinforced throughout the school community, the school and the curricula. To account for girls' experiences the definitions of violence must incorporate sexual harassment.

Violence, and violence against women must be seen within a broad social context. We must not simply focus on the classroom, but in recognising violence, it is important that the school environment itself does not perpetuate inequalities and violent behaviours. There must be a cooperative model of decision making and rule setting that sees an involvement from students, teachers, the school council and parents.

The education strategies must be short term and long term. In the short term, strategies must recognise the gender-based violence that is occurring in schools and intervene to stop it. For the long term, strategies must address and challenge the attitudes, assumptions and inequities that underlie all violence against women.

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