

We Have A Lot To Say

Young Women for Gender Equity

By Beverley Naveau

Des militantes féministes âgées de 9 ans? Eh oui ! Un club constitué de filles de la 4e à la 8e année d'une école primaire de Toronto discute des questions liées à l'équité dans le milieu scolaire en organisant des réunions, des sketches et même une discussion en panel au profit des enseignantes de l'Ontario !

As an affirmative action initiative at an inner city Toronto elementary school this past year, I started a Young Women's Club. All female staff and all female students from grades four to eight are invited to join. The Club is run as a voluntary, extra-curricular activity, with meetings held at lunchtime and after school. We currently have an active membership of about thirty girls between ages nine and twelve, from grades four to six. So far no students from grades seven and eight have joined the Club, but some have agreed to answer questionnaires, write journals, or be interviewed about gender equity issues. Although many of the grades seven and eight have expressed interest and enthusiasm for the idea of the Club, these twelve-to-fifteen-year old girls have indicated that they would be labelled as "a bunch of feminist dykes" by the boys and by some girls if they actively participated in this "feminist group." Some of the girls, and some of the teachers, believe it is wrong to have a club for females only. The older boys in the school are quite intrigued, a bit jealous, and have requested a club for themselves. The possibility for this is still up in the air.

The goal of the Young Women's Club is to discuss issues of gender equity and to study the impact of gender on the socialization of adolescent girls. Although we concentrate on the school system, we also deal with events in the family and in the broader culture. We attempt to identify connections between problems like violence against women and the marginalization of female students in the elementary schools. We try to increase awareness in staff and students of the concept and of the concerns of gender equity, and to give women's issues a higher profile in our school.

My decision to form this Club was the result in part of my experience in a workshop at an equity conference in the Spring of 1991. In this workshop a panel of female secondary school students shared their experiences of sexual harassment at two high schools in Toronto, and described a club for young women initiated at one school. Their examples of harassment were graphic and violent, told in the language and in the details of the experience. The message was lucid and powerful—and disturbing. These young women do not experience the safe and harassment-free learning environment to which they are entitled by law. Not only do they experience harassment and threats in their daily school life, they expect to do so. Other schools, they have heard,

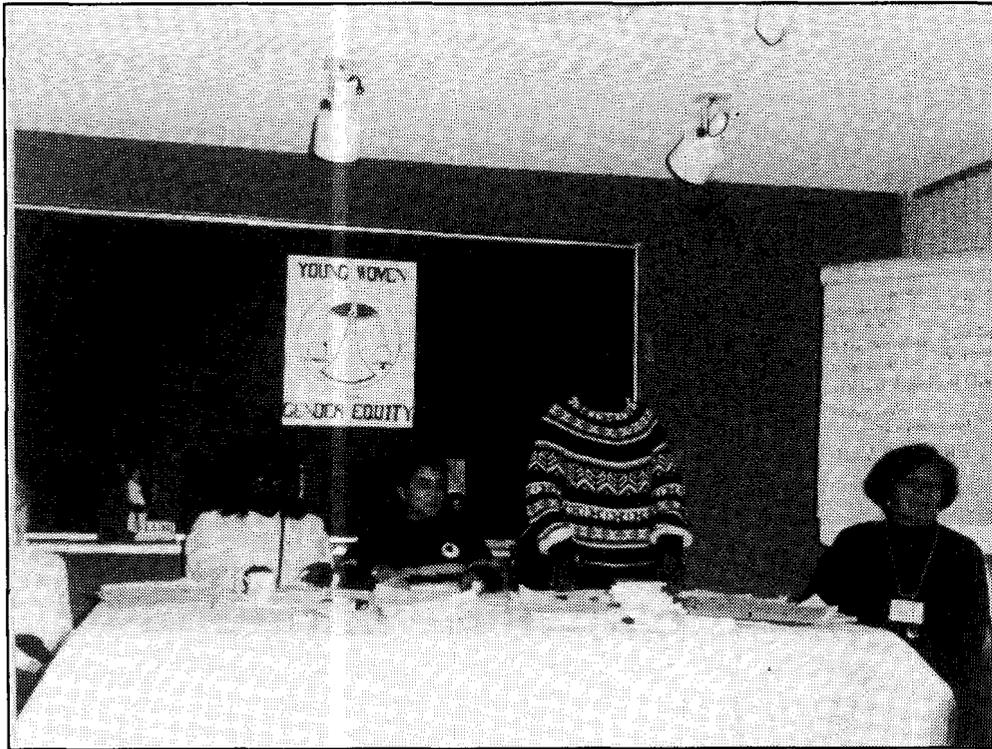
are worse, more dangerous. "Everybody knows," they said, "and nobody cares."

In attending other conferences on gender equity and education, I realized that there were no workshops offered or papers given on equity issues in the elementary school, and there were no presentations by elementary teachers. Materials that do exist on gender equity and elementary school students are not easily accessible to either the teachers or the students. Practices like gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and the marginalization of females do not suddenly manifest themselves at the beginning of high school. Yet the elementary system is sorely lacking in attention to gender discrimination.

As with any new endeavour there were problems in getting started with this one. We needed administrative and parental approval, permission and support, and we needed time. There are enormous demands made on the girls' time by band, choir, cheerleading, and other clubs. They are often responsible for younger siblings at lunchtime and after school. I have to juggle my commitment to this project in terms of time and energy with my own full- and part-time teaching, and my personal obligations. So this Club must assume high priority for all participants in order to be successful.

We have encountered problems arising from misinterpretations of the goals and focus of the work in the Club, because these were not defined clearly by me at the outset. It is vital to use accurate and clearly defined terminology, and to clarify the parameters of what will and will not be discussed in a group such as this, so that students, parents, administrators and other staff are aware of the purpose of the work. One of the areas that must be carefully managed involves ethical problems of Club members disclosing to me, a teacher, their experiences with other teachers and students, as well as events at home which might oblige me to seek intervention from outside agencies. I must always be aware of the responsibility and possible conflict in my role as confidante, group leader, and teacher.

In spite of these problems, we consider ourselves a success after just a few months. The purpose and goals of the Club have been clarified. We have administrative support and initial funding from the Affirmative Action Office of the Board. Parents have expressed their approval of the venture and in some cases sent in newspaper and magazine clippings and messages of encouragement. One of the fathers told his daughter that he thought it was really a good idea for her to belong to such a group, an important affirmation for her. Several teachers have offered verbal support and praise for our efforts. One man, who is the art teacher, designed a logo; the school librarian is ordering reading



materials on gender equity (at the request of the girls), and is helping to mount a campaign entitled "Images of Women" for International Women's Day. We have been promised a meeting room in the school where we can create our own space, store and display materials, and conduct private interviews.

The meetings are kept fairly informal, with information presented by me, or discussions about a movie or television show the girls have seen, or an experience one or more have had at school. The girls respond to questions, and share journal entries if they wish. We work on special projects like assemblies, poster campaigns, media studies and a clippings file. Several girls have begun writing poems, plays and stories about women's issues, and searching for and reading literature by and about women. We have invited guest speakers and are looking into the possibility of Wen-Do classes at our school. Our future plans include making a video, publishing our writings, and going to see the movie *Talk 16*. We have, to date, listed twenty-five activities we would like to do, and our list is still growing.

With their help I developed a series of questions to focus our research into the various ways in which gender equity exists in the schools and in the broader culture. The girls respond to these questions in group discussions, in journal writing, and in taped interviews with each other as well as both male and female students, staff and adults outside the school. These questions serve as a way to explain terms, and to organize their thoughts, feelings and experiences within the larger social framework of human rights and feminist issues. I collate, rewrite, and sometimes edit these responses to form a composite representation of their experience of being female at ages nine to twelve. This narrative then becomes their collective voice without risking the confidentiality of any disclosures. It is important for them to see their personal experiences in the political context of struggles against exploitation and for equality. They are learning to be

researchers and activists, as well as how to turn their anger, disappointments and insights into advocacy for social change.

But one of the primary goals in forming this Young Women's Club is to give the girls a voice with which to make public their concerns about equity issues. In their own voice they define the impact of gender on their socialization, they articulate how they are marginalized by gender, and they identify ways in which this happens in their immediate environment, their school. And, in their own words, they "have a lot to say about that!" The following are some examples of the things they have to say about particular issues and experience.

About sexual harassment by male students, they say: "Everywhere, all the time, since kindergarten." About being female they say: "I don't like being a girl when you

have to be afraid." About the school as a fair environment for boys and girls, they have a lot to say: "Are you kidding? The boys got new basketball shirts and gave the girls their old dirty ones. When I said that's not fair, I was told to take it or leave it and if I didn't want it there were lots of girls who would take my place. So I take it—I want to be on the team." "When girls complain about boys always choosing the games, we're told we have to go along with the majority and to quit complaining and be cooperative. I say, what majority? That's just a bunch of boys!" A nine-year old has a 'lot to say' about boys' behaviour in class. "For sure boys and girls are not treated equally in school. Everybody knows that boys get all the attention in class because they are so loud and so bad. They talk and talk and the teacher has to listen to them." "Everybody knows the boys get a lot more of everything in school—more money, more sports, more time for activities—since kindergarten!!" These girls are ages nine to twelve; they have just spent a few years in the school system. This is one example of what that system has taught them.

Another area where these young women have a lot to say is regarding violence against women. The following quotes represent a sample of their comments. "Men think they have the power, so they think they can do anything to us females. So they do. If they get caught the judge is likely a man so he says—oh you're old or you're sick or you might get raped in prison, so you just go on home to your family, so he does. And he does it again, because nothing happens to him." "Lots of times guys see stuff on TV or in movies and they say, hey, that looks like fun. I think I'll do that, and they do. A twelve-year old boy just raped a five-year old girl. Now where do you think he learned to do that?" "Girls are taught to act like sex toys and be nice and kind and not defend themselves. Boys are taught to be strong and tough and not to cry and to think they're better than girls. They think they have the right to do whatever they want and we won't stop them. Ten-year old boys

read *Playboy* and *Hustler* and then they want to grab us girls in the privates and see if we're the same." They do have a lot to say.

Three political activities have already taken these young women—ages nine to twelve, remember—into the public arena. The first, in November, was a poster campaign. They made posters with messages such as: 'Men, this has got to stop,' 'Men, if you treat us like garbage why not recycle us instead?,' 'Men: you're not going to push us around anymore; we're starting to push back.' 'Young Women: join the Club and talk about your problems of being a young woman.' One poster had a big red stop sign around which were words such as incest, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, date rape, murder. On every poster they put a peace sign.

The second political activity took place on December 5th, 1991. When the Club was still in the process of being organized and some of our present members had not yet had their first meeting, I called together members and potential members and shared with them materials I had received about the White Ribbon Campaign, and about commemorating the Montreal Massacre. They felt very strongly that there should be an assembly. They arranged the gym time, decorated the stage, made flowers, and cut and pinned about five hundred white ribbons. The gym teacher helped with rehearsals and the sound system, and a vice-principal assisted with 'crowd control.' The assembly was attended by all staff, and students from grades three to eight, about three hundred people. Those teachers who felt that their students were too young to attend the assembly, wore the white ribbon and discussed the program in their classrooms. The principal, wearing a commemorative button, introduced this First Annual Program on Violence Against Women at our school, and stressed its importance. The girls presented some statistics, and shared some of their thoughts on the problem. They read out the name of each young woman killed in the Montreal massacre, and of the fifty-four women murdered in Ontario between January 1st and that day in December, 1991. They had also listed these names on "In Memory" posters around the stage, because, they said, it is important for us to remember these women as people, not numbers. The girls who were reluctant to read lit candles. At the end of the service, they passed out white ribbons. Every staff and every student wore one. Some boys who had missed getting a ribbon came and asked for theirs so that they could give us their support also. One vice-principal wrote a note afterwards, thanking the girls for providing a very powerful message about a very important issue, and expressing her personal pride in their efforts.

Our next public forum was the Federation of Women Teachers of Ontario Winter Institute, where the Young Women for



Gender Equity and I presented a panel discussion on their perception of the need for gender equity in elementary schools. According to one federation executive, these workshops got "rave reviews." The young women were praised for bringing this message to the educators, and for their commitment toward ending violence against women. Many teachers expressed interest in starting similar clubs in their schools, in networking among the clubs, province-wide, and in helping their students to contribute to an anthology of writings by and about adolescent girls. The support given by these women was an empowering experience for the girls, and for me.

But this is only the beginning for the young women. The success of these first endeavours has led them to negotiate for some time, in their classrooms, to work on their writing projects. They want to design buttons and t-shirts, make placards, and take their show on the road. Their next project will be a month long campaign around International Women's Day. Following that will be a musical skit, written and performed by them, at a Spring Concert for parents, students, and teachers. In May, we will do another workshop at a York University conference on Gender/Race/Class Equity.

These young women want to show how the school could be turned into a safer and fairer place for everybody, and to engage the school staff in discussions of gender equity issues and other areas of human rights. They want to get past the point made by the secondary school students—"Everybody knows, and nobody cares." And like many women's groups, they have a lot of fundraising ideas from bake sales to book sales. In just over three months they have learned how many things are within the realm of possibility, and that they, ages nine to twelve, really can confront gender inequality in an elementary school system. Their logo is the scales of justice with the male and the female symbol on either side. Their goal is to balance the scales.