

# Violence against Young Women in Heterosexual Courtship

## *Teaching Girls to Resist*

*By Katherine A. Popaleni*

***As young girls we learn, through various cultural forms, that the courtship years are filled with self-indulgence, gaiety, and a sense of spontaneity. In short, we are told: "These are the best years of your life." Yet, in spite of the optimism, many young women are reporting that their heterosexual dating relationships are characterized, not by bliss, but by the controlling and abusive behaviour of male teenage partners. Violence directed at young women by their abusive boyfriends does not constitute spats between adolescent lovers. Rather, it comprises a series of systematic violations which include psychological abuse, physical battering, and sexual coercion and assault.***

Although there exists limited Canadian research on the subject, some feminist work is exploring the nature and scale of violence, as well as the subsequent danger that teenage dating relationships can hold for young women. In 1983, Vancouver's Battered Women's Support Services identified the problem through preliminary research.<sup>1</sup> The project concluded that battering in dating relationships was a serious problem for young women. Myrna Kostash, in her groundbreaking book, *No Kidding*, which is based on personal interviews with Canadian teenage girls, chronicles the experiences of humiliation, bat-

tering and sexual coercion that many young women endure at the hands of their boyfriends and fiancés.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Shirley Mercer conducted an exploratory study of violence against young women in high school dating relationships.<sup>3</sup> Through the use of a questionnaire and interviews, the data demonstrated that young women's dating experiences often are characterized by the domineering attitudes and abusive behaviour of their dating partners.

Finally, based on case studies of five young women, I identified three categories of systematic violation — psychological, physical, and sexual — that these young women experienced in their heterosexual courting relationships.<sup>4</sup> Psychological violations assumed four manifestations in these young women's experiences: restriction of activity and movement, threats, surveillance and criticism. Based on my interviews with the five girls, I developed two categories to describe their experiences of physical violation. The first category I have named "major acts of physical abuse," and the second, "small acts of physical torment."

Boys physically abused these young women using the following overtly violent means: slapping, shaking, punching (close fist), kicking and hitting (open fist). The second category, "small acts of physical torment," involved boyfriends and fiancés physically tormenting the young women in the following ways: twisting their arms, pinching their bodies in many places, giving them shoves, and poking their skin with sharp instruments, such as pen knives and pins.

Sexual violation was the third form of abuse that these five young women expe-

rienced in relationships with male partners. They were pressured into sexual relations through fraudulent statements: "If you loved me, you'd sleep with me," and threats to tarnish her reputation: "If you don't, I'll tell everybody you're easy." Moreover, guilt pressed these young women into having sex. Their solid reasons for abstaining abated when they were made to feel sorry for the young man or made to feel guilty about refusing. These girls also had sex within the context of tacit coercion. In this case, they engaged in sex because the consequences of refusing were worse than those of complying. Further, the young women disclosed having experienced coercive sexual violation, in the forms of sexual assault and rape. They were physically manhandled while at parties and dances. They were forced against their will by young men on first dates, as well as in long-term, established relationships.

Psychological, physical, and sexual violations adversely affect young women in profound ways. First, physical and sexual violations can result in bodily injury, including broken ribs, black eyes, twisted ankles, and bruising. Second, the three forms of violation produce damaging effects to the young woman's personal sense of self. Because the violations cause the young woman to lose self-esteem and personal pride and to develop feelings of powerlessness, the possibilities for personal development and self-definition are undermined. Finally, the violations lock the young woman into believing that she is responsible for the abuse. As such, she internalizes blame rather than fixing responsibility for the abuse on her male partner.

## Educational Resistance Strategies

In devising strategies to eliminate young men's violation of young women, I recommend that feminist academics and activists should employ two guiding tactics. First, the educational system can be utilized as a means through which to implement strategies for change. Adrienne Rich, in a speech entitled "Taking Women Seriously," has asked teachers of women students to consider how women's experience outside of the classroom makes it impossible for them to receive an education equal to men. "The undermining of self, of a woman's sense of her right to occupy space and walk freely in the world, is deeply relevant to education. The capacity to think independently, to take intellectual risks, to assert ourselves mentally, is inseparable from our physical way of being in the world, our feelings of personal integrity."<sup>6</sup>

Violence against young women in heterosexual courting relationships is relevant to education for at least three reasons. The young women who are being abused, and the young men who abuse, are adolescents, most of whom are enrolled in formal education. Education is entrusted with the public responsibility of teaching young people the knowledge and furnishing them with the tools necessary to participate successfully in the world. Finally, education has the potential to provide girls with the skills and empowerment to resist male violence.

A second tactic in eradicating violence against young women is the adoption of a policy of resistance. Such a policy would necessitate that we oppose not only the abusive behaviour but the social and political context which fosters the abuse. This tactic demands a thoroughgoing exploration and a rigorous analysis of the social and political context which encourages young men's violence against young women. The institution of heterosexual courtship forms the context from which young men's violence against their girlfriends emerges. Heterosexual courtship reflects what Janice Raymond calls "hetero-reality," that is, the world view in which woman exists for man.<sup>7</sup> This view informs the social and political context of heterosexual courting relations. We must understand how that context fosters violence against young women, and discern whose interests are furnished by its perpetuation.

Within the context of hetero-reality, adolescent courting relationships in this society are characterized by the domination of young men over young women: they demand a young woman's dependence, and they necessitate her servitude to, and identification with young men. They are relationships in which young men establish the rules in their interests and young women accommodate.

Bearing these two guiding tactics in mind, there are immediate, as well as

would act as a source of knowledge and inspiration with which to resist the patriarchal designation of woman as the victim.

Another educational strategy in developing girl's resistance involves the implementation in schools of physical self-defence training for adolescent women taught in all-female settings. Women's self-defence, for example, incorporates the experiences of women and girls, as well as their needs for safety,

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longer term educational strategies that, if implemented, would provide girls with the know-how to resist male violence.

In the short term, I recommend that schools incorporate into the curriculum the teaching of women's and girls' history and traditions. On the whole, contributions that women and girls have made and continue to make to our society are either ignored or treated as a "subfield" in education.<sup>8</sup> Without a knowledge of women's history and traditions women are lost.

Girls need to hear their own stories retold through both history and fiction. Claiming an education about women and girls would foster the empowerment in girls necessary to resist hetero-reality's insistence on compulsory heterosexual courtship, and to repudiate the heterosexual practices which insist that girls diminish themselves, identify principally with boyfriends, and act as service providers to others. Inheriting the knowledge that our forefathers were scientists, philosophers, writers, dissenters, wise women, inventors, community leaders and much, much more would present girls with role models from the past. These stories would cultivate in young women the self-respect, personal dignity and self-identity so crucial to developing their subjectivities as active, self-conscious, self-reliant subjects. The presentation of active, powerful, female role models through historical and literary modes also

support and non-competitiveness into the method and content of its programming.<sup>9</sup> In its consciousness-raising capacity, such a programme facilitates the creation of a discourse and language which labels men's abusive attitudes and behaviour toward young women as violence. Self-defence training also makes girls, in Catharine Bray's terms, "self-conscious — both skilled and able to perceive their bodies as skilled while they move."<sup>10</sup> This development of body awareness and body competence would help to combat the notions of passivity and immobility traditionally ascribed to girls through compulsory femininity. Once young women become "self-conscious" they "view their bodies not through the eyes, nor as if they were objects apart from themselves... but as subjects."<sup>11</sup>

A third short-term strategy in developing girls' resistance involves encouraging closer identification between young women. This strategy would counter the world-view of hetero-reality, that women exist always and only in relation to young men. As part of this strategy, education must oppose the patriarchal principles that women are each other's worst enemies, and that female friendship is immature and adolescent. One means of encouraging closer identification between young women is the development of peer-oriented girls' support groups.<sup>12</sup> The groups would act as emotional support, as a forum for raising girls' collective con-

sciousness concerning violation within courtship, and as a space to voice personal experiences. The formal implementation of young women's support groups would extend the potential in many girls' relationships where advice is given on an ad-hoc basis to a more institutionalized support system for young women.

Community-based groups, such as sexual assault and women's centres, transition houses, and adolescent or teen centres, should play a role in formulating and distributing accurate, useful, non-sexist information outlining the potential for violence in dating situations. Specifically, literature and other mediums should indicate that the abuse of young women by their male partners is neither an isolated nor a unique experience, and that girls are not responsible for the violent behaviour of their male partners. Well-publicized outreach material concerning girlfriend battering can provide young women with options and enable them to have greater control over their lives.<sup>13</sup>

Short-term tactics must be complemented by strategies which will, over time, serve to eradicate compulsory heterosexual courtship and the world view of hetero-reality. To that end, education must be geared towards the erosion of patriarchy and the gender inequality upon which it thrives. I agree with Katherine Lahey's appeal for an alternative to patriarchal thinking, which "focusses on concepts of hierarchy, right and wrong, restitution, [and] rectification."<sup>14</sup> This objective can be met if educational institutions include feminist teaching as a pedagogical priority.

Feminist teaching is a strategy that will work toward not only girls' resistance to male violence, but also the elimination of male supremacy. Jeri Wine's concept of "relationality," that is, "one's sense of connectedness to and responsibility for others, to the necessary interdependence among human beings," is important to this process of re-building society.<sup>15</sup>

As a means of encouraging girls' resistance and ending male supremacy, feminist teachers would find imaginative ways of building a critical counter-hegemony for girls, the creation of a "self-conscious analysis...and the development of collective practices and organization that can oppose the hegemony of the existing order."<sup>16</sup> Feminist teachers would build such a counter-hegemony by creating the avenues and opportunities for students to

develop a critical consciousness. First, the teaching would emanate from the assumption that personal knowledge and experience are valid. In other words, what happens in the everyday life of individual people has political meaning and significance. Second, building a critical consciousness involves seeing patterns emerge out of events and behaviours which seemed previously to be disparate and random. In other words, it provides the framework to make sense out of that which before was confusing and disconcerting.

With a feminist critical consciousness in place, young women students could take up the task of defining and naming the violations they experienced in heterosexual courtship as previously difficult to identify.

The implementation of these educational strategies, I believe, will foster in girls a resistance to male violence in courtship relationships. Their adoption and practice of these strategies will aid in reaching the objectives of safety and empowerment. Perhaps their implementation also will replace a hetero-relational model of courtship with one which is not compulsory and which permits a heterogeneity of ideas, beliefs and practices. Only then, can courtship become an exploration and celebration of one another, not a colonization of girls by boys.

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Gibson, "Under His Thumb. Teenage Battering," *Healthsharing* (Summer 1984), pp. 10-13.

<sup>2</sup> Myrna Kotash, *No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Shirley Litch Mercer, "Not a Pretty Picture: An Exploratory Study of Violence Against Women in High School Dating Relationships," *Resources for Feminist Research* 17.2 (1988), pp. 15-23.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine A. Popaleni, "The Denial of Self: An Exploratory Study of Young Women's Experiences of Violation Within Heterosexual Courtship," Master of Arts Thesis, University of Toronto, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Ruth R. Pierson for helping me to capture the essence of this violation in words.

<sup>6</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), p. 242.

<sup>7</sup> Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for*

*Friends* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Margrit Eichler, "Sexism in Research and its Policy Implications," in *Taking Sex into Account*, ed. Jill McCalla Vickers (Ottawa: Carleton U P, 1983), pp. 5-16, Dolores Barracano Schmidt and Earl Robert Schmidt, "The Invisible Woman: The Historian As a Professional Magician," in *Liberating Women's History*, ed. Bernice A. Carroll (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1976), pp. 42-54.

<sup>9</sup> Pauline Bart, "A Study of Women Who Both Were Raped and Avoided Rape," *The Journal of Social Issues* 37 (1981), pp. 123-27.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Bray, "How Do Girls and Women Learn to Move? A New Question for Feminist Researchers?" *Resources for Feminist Research* 16.4 (1987), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> This recommendation was made by two of the young women I interviewed in my study.

<sup>13</sup> Debra Lewis, *Dating Violence* (Vancouver: Battered Women's Support Services, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen Lahey, "Research on Child Abuse in Liberal Patriarchy," *Taking Sex into Account*, *op. cit.*, pp. 156-84.

<sup>15</sup> Jeri Dawn Wine, "Gynocentric Values and Feminist Psychology," in *Feminism in Canada*, eds. Geraldine Finn and Angela Miles (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982), pp. 67-87.

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen Weiler, *Women Teaching for Change, Gender, Class and Power* (Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), p. 153. In her study of women public school teachers and administrators, Weiler used these words to describe their struggles to develop and incorporate a feminist counter-hegemony.

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