



Educational Strategies for Change



Listening to the Voices of Adolescent Women

*By Alessandra Callegarini and
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Who can you trust these days? I can't be sure it won't happen to me. Could I say no if I loved my dad? Guys force you to do things that you don't want to—they presume you'll say yes. I'm scared to walk down the road at night. Rape really scares me.'

With these words, one young woman who participated in a study sponsored by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, entitled *A Capella*, expressed her concern about violence in her life and the lives of other women. A majority of the nine hundred and sixty-one adolescent women who participated in this study, published in November, 1990, expressed concerns about actual or potential physical and sexual abuse.

Although some attempt is being made by boards of education to provide support services to students dealing with violence and to include units on violence against women in courses of study, there is clearly a need for much more work in this area. Furthermore there is a need for educational programs which will help young people to analyze how the social structures, which create and are supported by violence against women, operate in their own lives.

The purpose of this article is to describe work being done by a group of educators within the Toronto Board of Education. This work is designed to provide young women with a safe envi-

ronment where they can analyze how a patriarchal social order shapes and circumscribes their lives, and explore possibilities for resisting and changing that social order. We want to support young women in becoming mature, capable adults in the world as they experience it, while simultaneously helping them to investigate ways in which they can change the world. While we operate from a position of passionate commitment to our students and to the ideals of equity and social justice, our work is evolving and tentative. We are not always sure that our methods are appropriate nor are we always clear about where this work is leading us. We certainly have no formulas for success, no plan of action which can be reproduced in another setting. What we are offering are our reflections on our work with young women over the past year, including the many questions this work raises for us.

Before describing our work, it is important to explain the context within which it was undertaken. Senior administrators and trustees at the Toronto Board of Education have a history of supporting the efforts of feminist staff who have worked on developing gender equity in the curriculum and on providing equitable employment and promotion opportunities for staff.

Within this supportive context, a committee of teachers, vice principals and the curriculum co-ordinator responsible for wom-

en's issues met in November, 1989, to plan a retreat for high school women. The retreat was seen as an opportunity for consciousness raising and for supporting young women in actively working on issues of sexism in their schools. Eight schools, which were represented by staff members on the planning committee, were invited to send five young women and a teacher on the retreat.

During the four days of the retreat, the young women discussed sexism in schools and in the workplace, violence in women's lives, sexism in the family, and sexuality. The process was designed so that the students sometimes met in one large group but also worked in school groups and in "family" groups which were structured to be a heterogeneous mix of students by school, race and cultural background. The retreat format involved much discussion as well as opportunities for art and drama as means of exploring women's lives, co-operative games and presentations by guests such as Marilyn Walsh, a Wen Do instructor, Sue Johansen, a sex educator, and Company of Sirens, a feminist theatre group.

While the students met in family groups with facilitators, the eight teachers met to discuss ways of supporting students. The teachers' group also provided a chance for staff to explore how sexism affected their professional lives. Comments from students in their evaluation of the retreat confirmed their overwhelmingly positive reaction to this pilot project.

It was great! It really gave me a different perspective on the way I look at myself and at those around me.

Emotionally draining and uplifting. Fun and educational.

I enjoyed it very much and learned a lot.

I think that this was very productive and hope that it will continue in the years to come.

Many made suggestions for changes and almost all mentioned that they hoped the retreat would be offered annually. Several young women suggested that a similar program for male students should be established. One student expressed it this way: "I hope men are given the opportunity to participate in a retreat like this in order to make them aware, letting them become active in combatting sexism and violence against women." As another student said: "Now, it's our brothers' turn to change and grow." The staff involved in planning the retreat took this suggestion quite seriously and in the spring of 1991 there was a retreat for young men as well as a retreat for young women.

Before leaving the retreat, the five young women and their teacher, Alessandra, from West Toronto Collegiate decided to form a club called the Women's Equality Club (WEC).

West Toronto Collegiate is an inner-city school of approximately 1100 students. The student population comes mainly from working-class, immigrant families. Approximately twenty-five percent of the students are recent immigrants and are enrolled in the English as a Second Language program. Students come from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds and races but those of Portuguese heritage form the largest group. There are several staff members, including the principal, who identify themselves as feminists.

The members of WEC decided to have formal activities on

Wednesdays which are advertised to the whole student body and to meet for informal chats and planning sessions each Monday. WEC has about fifteen regular members but has attracted probably ten times that number of students, both female and male, to the various formal activities. The club members in age range from 15-22 years old and come from a wide variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. There is no hierarchical organization in the club and no one has ever suggested that there should be. Decisions are always made collectively.

The activities sponsored by WEC have included showing feature-length films (e.g. *The Color Purple*, *Fatal Attraction*, *She's Gotta Have It*, *The Legend of Billie Jean*) which are followed by discussion. (After viewing *The Color Purple*, one student painfully recounted how her own mother told her she hoped her daughter would marry a man who would beat her because she was "too smart for her own good.") Club members have attended live theatre, participated in a women's self-defense course and often view shorter audio-visual resources at noon-hour.²

As a result of WEC's consistent efforts to address sexism, it has received a good deal of attention both within and beyond the Toronto Board of Education. In May 1990, WEC was nominated for an award by the Toronto Board of Education's Organization for Women in Leadership. The award banquet gave the young women the opportunity to share a wonderful evening with older women whose feminist work has spanned decades. WEC was invited to speak to a women's studies class at another Toronto high school during the fall term. In October 1990, Toronto Board of Education staff responsible for women's studies and affirmative action invited four WEC members to speak on a panel addressing school affirmative action and women's studies representatives.

Club members participated in the *A Capella* study. This year the club is involved in an Ontario Institute for Studies in Education study on sexual harassment. All of these activities have provided opportunities for the young women to speak in public, build their confidence, and recognize how much other women support and applaud their efforts at confronting sexism. It has given them the sense that they are never alone. On their own initiative some WEC members have begun to attend political events in the community. It is exciting to see how these young women have begun to make these issues their own.

All the work which we have done with young women over the last year has raised many questions for us and we will now highlight some of these questions not with the intention of providing answers but rather to share our reflections and to prompt further discussion.

When examining the success of the retreat, it is simple to say that we must provide frequent and regular opportunities for young women to explore how sexism affects their lives. The more such opportunities students have, the better. But can this work be meaningfully incorporated into curriculum? Although this would be ideal, such an approach would mean relying on some teachers who were both unprepared to deal with the issues and unsympathetic to the goals of feminism. In fact, the Ontario Ministry of Education does mandate that issues of gender equity be dealt with across the curriculum but in fact this happens only if the individual classroom teacher shares this commitment. We support efforts to include gender issues in the curriculum but we recognize that given the present situation, these issues may not be

taken up from a feminist perspective. It is important that young women have some opportunity, even if it is outside regular classroom, to discuss their concerns about the effects of sexism within a supportive, feminist context.

When gender issues are incorporated into the curriculum, teachers often experience a certain amount of resistance, from both female and male students. What are appropriate ways to deal with such resistance? We believe that one of the reasons WEC has been so successful is that its membership consists of young women who attend because they want to attend. There is no coercion to join, merely an invitation. Obviously, the students who participate must have a minimal acceptance that these issues are legitimate topics for discussion. There have been several instances where other teachers have told Alessandra that they know of students who would make great WEC members but, for one reason or another, these students choose not to join. What can we learn from the success of WEC in creating a comfortable environment to discuss gender issues that can help us in overcoming resistance in the classroom?

Another question that arises from this work concerns who holds the power to "set the agenda." Adolescent women face different realities, concerns and issues than adult women. We feel that we have attempted to develop procedures that enable the young women with whom we are working to set the agenda. In preparation for the retreat, over one hundred students were given questionnaires and their responses were used to formulate the retreat program. At WEC meetings, Alessandra brings many suggestions for activities but she tries to ensure that these are in line with stated interests of club members. Indeed, the informal chats are usually the primary source of ideas for club activities. But it is inevitable that teachers who have institutional power will have considerable influence on programs for young women. The question is, how do we use that influence — recognizing the value of our knowledge as adult women and as teachers — in a way that does not invalidate the younger women's experiences?

The last question raises further issues. On the one hand some adolescent women are pre-disposed to seeing the world through rose-coloured glasses, believing that the world is theirs to have — a fancy career, a high income, children, a loving husband. Are we doing them a disservice if we shatter those dreams? Is it a more radicalizing experience for young women to discover the obstacles facing women by stumbling into them than by being told to avoid them? Might some adolescent women "write off" the negative experiences of their older sisters as mistakes which they will not repeat? On the other hand, adolescent women have already survived various degrees of abuse and discrimination and we want to focus on helping them to heal. We want to try to reaffirm their optimism and help them to take control of their lives. How can we give appropriate support to all these young women in a manner which respects their varying life experiences?

This question leads to the subject of how to challenge socially constructed notions of femininity while also supporting young women who are experimenting with a range of ways of expressing themselves as women. For many young women, feminism is an "F" word. For example, one young woman quoted in *A Capella* states that she sees a need to learn "to deal with discrimination in the working field without being feminists (yuck)."³ Of course the stereotype of feminism is often a media distortion and simplification of the complexity and the many different perspec-

tives of the women's movement. As feminist teachers, we want to encourage young women in moving towards equity in a way which recognizes that there are many differences among women. An adolescent woman who wears makeup and a miniskirt is exploring one aspect of femininity which should neither be devalued nor upheld as an ideal. Feminism must always be shown as increasing the range of choices open to women, never diminishing them.

We continue to grapple with many issues that this work raises for us, but we feel that our goal of empowering young women is a precondition to changing the patriarchal social order and eliminating violence against women. The young women who are members of WEC will never be the same. Their voices have been heard and affirmed by people in authority, by adult women. They are involved in a process which contributes to their understanding of how they have internalized sexism and supports them in the many significant ways they resist sexism. A student quoted in *A Capella* states, "Please understand that teenage women are people. We don't go through 'stages'. The issues in our lives are important to us, the fears real. Don't look down on us. Try to understand us."⁴ The authors of *A Capella* report that several of the discussion groups organized specifically to gather information for the study have continued to meet.

Young women want to be heard, to have a forum in which they can share their concerns, ideas and hopes with other young women and with adult women. On the last day of the retreat, one young woman from West Toronto Collegiate said,

We should really try to meet like this after the retreat... like every day.

¹ Canadian Teachers' Federation, *A Capella: A Report on the Realities, Concerns, Expectations and Barriers Experienced by Adolescent Women in Canada* (November, 1990), p. ix.

² *Still Killing Us Softly*, Cambridge Documentary Films. Available from National Film Board; *Stale Roles, Tight Buns*, O.A.S.I.S. (a men's collective organized against sexism and institutional stereotypes). Available from Canadian Learning Company, Scarborough, Ontario; *Older, Stronger, Wiser*, National Film Board of Canada; *The Crown Prince*, National Film Board of Canada.

³ *A Capella*, p. 18.

⁴ *A Capella*, p. 20.

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