

Beyond Sexual Violence

Considering Other Forms of Harm Experienced by Post-Secondary Students

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Les cinq dernières années ont rapporté de réels efforts qui visaient à contrer la violence sexuelle et raciste sur les campus des collèges et universitaires du Canada et des États-Unis. Des initiatives ont ciblé le problème et l'étendue de la violence sexuelle et les moyens de la prévenir chez les jeunes filles surtout, mais elles n'ont pas réussi à prévenir la violence que les étudiantes subissent dans leur vie. Les auteurs d'une recherche qui a duré deux ans, Construire. Agir. Changer. les a engagées à prévenir la violence contre les femmes sur le campus, s'attendaient à entendre parler de violence sur le campus mais elles furent étonnées de voir que les étudiantes subissaient plus de violence dans leur foyer par les membres de leur famille que sur le campus. Elles ont même affirmé que les campus étaient plus sécuritaires parce qu'ils étaient loin du mal qu'elles subissaient à la maison.

The Issue of Sexual Violence on Campus

The focus of violence reduction on campuses over the past twenty years has been sexual violence prevention and response. The issue of sexual violence on campus has become increasingly visible to the general public and

is acknowledged as a widespread social problem (Wies). Funding to address violence against women on campus for projects like *Build. Act. Change.* is part of a greater recognition across North American federal, provincial, and state governments and institutions that sexual violence is a problem, and one that disproportionately affects university and college-aged women. In the United States, the issue has received significant attention from the Office of the President. In 2014, President Obama established a Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. In the opening pages of its First Report, “*Not Alone*” the extent of the problem and the importance of taking action is made clear: “one in five women is sexually assaulted in college. Most often, it’s by someone she knows...” (White House Task Force 2). More recently, the Ontario provincial government announced its \$41 million action plan to combat sexual violence (*It’s Never Okay*) and approved Bill 132, the Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act, 2016.

One risk factor for experiencing sexual violence is being a young woman (Sinha). Indeed, young women

under the age of 25 experience the highest incidence of many forms of violence including sexual violence, femicide, criminal harassment (stalking) and violence by an intimate partner (Johnson and Colpitts). Young women ages 20-24, the span of years during which women typically attend higher education institutions, are at highest risk for dating violence. And young women ages 18-24 are at the highest risk of stalking (*Stalking in Canada*) Since women are now the majority of undergraduate students across Canada, (Turcotte) the importance of addressing violence—its causes, prevention, and responses—is more critical than ever.

Canadian campuses have dedicated attention and resources to address dating and intimate partner violence (and more recently stalking behavior and online cyber bullying). Resources have also been allocated to address the fear of assault by strangers by improving factors in the physical environment on campus, such as increased lighting, clearer sightlines, and access to emergency phones and walk-safer programs. These interventions have been and continue to be important, but there are more dimensions to

student experiences of violence. The findings of the *Build. Act. Change.* project add a new dimension to our collective understanding of violence as experienced by students and the impact it has on their personal and academic lives. What affected students most deeply was their experience of harm in the home by family members—fathers, brothers, mothers,

as well, including the Muslim Students Association, Open Dialogues multi-faith group, Scarborough Campus:OUT, Jamaican Canadian Students Association, the Chinese Students & Scholars Association, and others. These extensive partnerships, particularly with students and student groups, represented the need and broad support for creating a culture

student groups, administrative offices, faculty, and equity offices to learn about the scope and nature of violence impacting the lives of young women attending UTSC. Data was also gathered from student-led safety audits on campus, two online surveys, activity evaluation forms, focus groups, and reports to counselors. We heard from hundreds of students about issues that

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The *Build. Act. Change.* Project

In March 2012, a collaboration of offices at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) partnered with a local community organization, the Scarborough Women's Centre, and received two-year project funding from Status of Women Canada, "to engage young people to prevent violence against women on college and university campuses." The funding expressly required students and an NGO to partner. There was broad campus partnership on the steering committee which included representatives from the Department of Student Life, Campus Police, Community Safety Office, Womyn & Trans Centre, Student Union, faculty from the Women & Gender Studies program, and the Tri-campus Assault Counsellor/Educators. More than a dozen student groups participated

of safety on campus. The specific goals of the UTSC project were to identify risks and barriers to safety related to student experience of violence, to identify gaps and needs in resources, create awareness, and recommend strategies for creating a safe environment in which students can thrive. We specifically titled our project "*Build. Act. Change.*" (BAC) to reflect the goals to *Build* awareness, *Act* to make a difference, and help support positive *Change* to prevent and reduce violence against women.

Over the two years of the project, more than 50 events and initiatives were hosted by BAC to build awareness of how the fear, threat and experience of violence affect women in general and on campuses specifically. Students were keen to explore the role that gender expectations and cultural pressures (such as those in media representations) play in affecting violence against women. They were also interested in exploring ways in which multiple intersecting identities such as ethnicity, race, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity impacted student experiences and responses to violence. The project consulted with individual students,

concerned them—more than 800 students participated over the course of the project (about six percent of the total student population).

Students expressed concerns about cyber abuse, dating violence, and stalking behaviors, as well as fear of stranger danger in public places. Significantly, we also learned that the violence that students were experiencing was not limited to incidents on campus—it also occurred within their homes and extended community, perpetrated by one or more members of their family—fathers, brothers, mothers and members of extended family. It took many forms—physical, sexual, emotional, financial—and ranged in severity. Students experiencing violence had various social locations in terms of culture, ethnicity, faith, race socioeconomic status, dis/ability, sexual orientation and other identity groups. Women were not the only ones who talked about their experience of violence committed by family members; men and gender non-conforming students did as well.

The harm, abuse, and scope of violence students described via the online survey, in focus groups and

disclosure to project peers and counselors, included:

- Physical and emotional punishment for not adhering to gender role expectations, achieving academic expectations, or adhering to physical/behavioural expectations.

- Physical and emotional punishment for deviance from expected norms or disobedience.

- Critiques of body size and academic performance by verbal insults and name calling, such as “slut.”

- Persistent surveillance by monitoring student behaviour and communication, (emails, phone calls, texts, and social media engagement), tracking with GPS technology, checking backpacks.

- Breaches of records or accessing the student user name and passwords to find their grades and submitted assignments through the course content management system.

- Forced marriages.

- Feeling uncertain about how to help a family member experiencing harm.

- Prevented from intervening or providing help to someone experiencing harm or violence.

The project provided an opening for some students to come forward to share their stories and reach out for help. Responding to awareness material distributed by *Build Act Change* (posters in washrooms and other outreach initiatives), two students shared their stories with faculty and staff. Included here with their permission:

The men in my family ... have dominated me through physical abuse as well as verbal abuse. They have thrown objects at my face. I've been bruised, cut, threatened to have multiple men sent after me to beat me up, and have even had a butcher knife to my neck.

Another student described feeling

miserable because her family felt that “women need to be controlled... [as] “It was their way to put me in my place as a woman so that I would not challenge their authority.”

Even though the authors have worked collectively for over 60 years on issues of gender-based violence, we were surprised students wanted to talk more about violence by family members than campus sexual violence. Why? The prevailing discourse about sexual violence on campus does not leave room for disclosures and conversations about violence within the family, violence perpetrated by men and women. This is a taboo that has deep roots in the sanctity of the family and the hesitation and even refusal of the state and its institutions to “interfere” in family matters. While startling to learn, we should not have been surprised by disclosures of family harm shared by students. It is an example of the reality and extent of violence in the lives of girls and women in Canada and elsewhere. As powerfully articulated by Amnesty International, violence against women is one of the most urgent human rights issues of our time (*Violence Against Women*).

Violence by Family Members

Many studies over the past 25 years have demonstrated the extent of gender-based violence perpetrated by family members. The national Violence Against Women Survey conducted by Statistics Canada was the first comprehensive study that determined that violence against women is widespread. It found that about one half of all women in Canada experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16. The 2016 report, *Focus on Family Violence in Canada*, released by the Chief Public Health Officer, reconfirmed (as have other studies) that family violence is complex and

impacts the lives of millions of Canadians. These data include students at university and college campuses. Despite this, we have yet to see research that adequately addresses the scope of violence in students' lives, the impact it has on their ability to study and learn, and the responsibilities of our institutions to ensure safe learning environments.

Women, people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, gender-questioning, Indigenous people, and people with disabilities, are at greater risk of experiencing family violence and its impacts (*A Focus on Family Violence* 3). It often goes unreported on campus and in the wider community for a number of reasons: reluctance to talk about it due to safety concerns (from the perpetrators and/or the institution), fear of further marginalisation, stigma associated with being a “victim,” the fallout from implicating family members, and/or the fear of not being believed. Black and other racialized students and staff reported concerns that Black and other racialized men would be mistreated by police if 911 was called in response to violence. Other reasons not to disclose violence by family members included feelings of shame, fear of being blamed or judged believing the issue is not important enough to report or take action on, or that such incidents are a “private” and personal matter.

Lack of data due to the absence of formal reporting should not be considered an indication that violence perpetrated by family members is not a problem for postsecondary students. While campus counselling and support services address individual concerns about violence perpetrated by family members, the issues need to be addressed on a much larger scale, beyond personal support and interventions. We can extrapolate from the national data that significant numbers of students in colleges

and universities across Canada are experiencing violence and harm in the home, yet do not report what is happening. The violence and harm articulated by students over the two years of the *Build. Act. Change.* project is not unique to our campus; it is of national and international concern.

The consequences and impacts of violence occurring in the family can

sexual violence on campus) are living in what psychiatrist Judith Herman called, “a dialectic of trauma.” It is this trauma, fear, and silence that prevents students from fully participating in their learning and other co-curricular and community activities. The consequences to their lives, individually and collectively, and to colleges and universities as public institutions, is

allowing students to withdraw from courses or defer term work and exams (even if they do not present official police reports), without academic or financial penalties. Should ~~Must~~ students always be required to be registered with a documented disability with a campus Accessibility Office to receive academic accommodations, in effect imposing a significant barrier

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be devastating in the short and long term. Those harmed experience a wide range of negative consequences that can affect their lives forever (de Keseredy). These include serious physical health concerns (such as chronic pain, gastrointestinal and vision problems, skin allergies) and psychological, emotional, and mental health effects (such as anger, anxiety, depression, chronic stress). One of the greatest impacts of the experience of violence is the fear carried inside of its survivors, which often drives them to silence. Fear and silence can leave students feeling vulnerable and alone, and with a sense of hopelessness. These consequences affect students’ ability to focus, concentrate, complete work on time, write tests and exams, and to fully participate in campus life.

Students who experience an extraordinary amount of harm—whether physical, emotional, or sexual—obviously carry this with them to class, and this burden impacts their learning (Horsman). We must acknowledge that students who live with, witness, or fear violence in its many forms (violence that is perpetrated by family members as well as

immeasurable. Without appropriate resources to address the breadth of student needs, the experience of violence in all its forms and manifestations becomes an issue of human rights, one that impacts students’ equitable access to education.

The attention and support for sexual violence prevention and response on campuses is critically important and long overdue. These initiatives, however, have not addressed the harm that so many students experience at home and within their families. Educational institutions need to proactively address the impact of these forms of violence on students. Dedicated funding for research to further understand the extent and impact of violence perpetrated by family members on students is a critical next step. Universities, colleges and governments must reexamine their safety policies, access to student loans and other financial supports, and registrarial procedures to support students experiencing violence. Questions that must be asked include whether they are providing adequate access to safe places/emergency housing for students who need to leave their family homes: Whether registrars are

to students who have experienced violence. Is the rise in students with mental health disabilities who request academic accommodation connected to experiences of violence and related impacts on mental health? Are there enough and appropriate counselling supports to meet the needs of affected students? Is data collected across University services to track students’ experiences of violence? Are the rules for government loans too restrictive for students by insisting that parents’ signature is required? Do the regulations assume that young people can live safely at home while completing their studies? These are just some of the questions that need to be pursued.

More attention must be focused on the extent of violence in students’ lives so that campuses can become a place where violence is “unlearned”. The first person accounts of violence and harm by family members, as shared in the *Build. Act. Change.* project demonstrate a need for further dedicated research on the extent of violence in the lives of students and the impacts of that harm to them, particularly as it affects their learning and overall participation in academic and co-curricular life.

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The Pattern Marion Made

she knitted her life
into a mosaic of socks
sweaters teddy bears

sent them purled and plain
to children around
the whole comfortless
world where the stitches
were held by sticky fingers

she slipped one
ribbed yet another
into a cable of friendship
that increased the breadth
of who she was until
many lands knew
the pattern of her being

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