

Young Women's Experiences with Reporting Sexual Assault to Police

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Ce texte rapporte en détail le point de vue de jeunes filles entre 12 et 17 ans sur une agression sexuelle. Les quelques adolescentes qui ont écrit croient que presque toutes les femmes ont peur de ce qui arrivera quand elles iront à la police. On ne les croit pas.

Sexual assault is a pervasive societal problem that has had a devastating impact on the lives of many women. While the stories that are shared about sexual victimization are told firsthand by women from many perspectives—based on race, culture, sexual orientation, physical and intellectual ability, and economic status—the voices of young women are rarely heard. There is very little discussion in the literature of the experiences of female adolescents who have been sexually assaulted; these experiences have unique characteristics that are different and separate from women in general.

This study explores the experiences of young women who reported a sexual assault to police. During adolescence, women are most vulnerable to being sexually assaulted, often by a known perpetrator versus a stranger. Relatively little research has been done on the factors affecting young women's decisions to report sexual assault to the police. The decision to report a sexual assault is the most important step in the criminal justice system; it initiates the whole process. Accord-

ing to a 1993 Statistics Canada study, very few women are choosing to take this step. This landmark survey found that approximately 94 per cent of women who are sexually assaulted do not report the incident to police. Of the six per cent of sexual assaults that are reported, only 40 per cent result in charges being laid by the police. This widely recognized and often cited study neither addresses the incidence of sexual assault among young female adolescents nor does it describe their rate of reporting to the police.

Incidence of Sexual Assault Among Young Women

Sexual victimization during adolescence is widespread, occurring more often than in any other age group. The American Academy of Pediatrics reported in a 2001 policy statement that adolescents continue to have the highest rates of rape and other sexual assaults of any age group, and that two-thirds to three-quarters of these attacks are perpetrated by an acquaintance or a relative.

Adolescents are a high-risk group with respect to both sexual assault victimization and offending. Female adolescents are most likely to be assaulted by a male peer: someone whom they are dating or with whom they are acquainted. The male perpetrator is often in the same age

range as the survivor. This type of sexual assault is commonly referred to as "date rape." In a review of the literature on date rape, Vaughn I. Rickert and Constance M. Wiemann found that adolescents and young adults are four times more likely to be victims of sexual assault than women in any other age group. In most of these cases, the perpetrator is an acquaintance of the survivor. Acquaintance rape is a crime and is the most likely situation in which a young woman will be sexually assaulted, yet it is a highly under-reported offense. According to the Ontario Women's Directorate, only one per cent of date rapes are reported to the police (1).

Young People's Attitudes About Sexual Assault

Studies examining adolescents' attitudes about sexual assault have often found that this group believes many myths and stereotypes. Universally, these studies have found that males attribute more responsibility for sexual assault to the victim than do females. Dominant societal values that reinforce gender-specific roles are especially prevalent among adolescents. These prevailing beliefs serve to silence young women who are sexually assaulted, as they fear being blamed and ridiculed by their peers for being a "victim." Data on gender

socialization show that generally attitudes about dating and sex are already in place by age 14.

Myths and stereotypes about sexual assault are strongly entrenched in our society. Generally, people are more sympathetic to victims whom they perceive as not being “blameworthy” or not deserving of this fate. Martha Burt grouped sexual assault myths

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into four main classifications: (1) nothing happened; (2) no harm was done; (3) she wanted it; and (4) she deserved it. These myths destroy survivor credibility and enhance survivor culpability. A woman who is sexually assaulted suddenly and violently by a stranger is more likely to fit the description of a “real” rape than a woman who has had some kind of previous relationship with the assailant. For a survivor, this means that she has to come to terms not only with the psychological and emotional aftermath of the attack itself, but also with the reactions of others, especially the negative, subjective, responses based on the myths and stereotypes that surround the subject of sexual assault. Endorsement of rape myths by both males and females is a reflection of our rape-prone culture. However rape myths are perpetuated, adolescents are highly critical of each other. Negative reactions by peers make it even more difficult for young women to come forward and report a sexual assault to police.

The Trend of Underreporting Sexual Assault

Many studies look at why women do not report a sexual assault to police. Relatively little research has been done on the factors that lead survivors to the opposite conclusion. Often the decision to report to the police is based on a consideration of the costs and benefits of such action.

In *Sexual Assault Among Adolescents*, Suzanne S. Ageton reports that over 75 per cent of adolescent survivors do not tell their parents about their sexual assault (32). The non-disclosure of a sexual assault to one’s parents would make it very unlikely that the police would be notified. Adults often play a very influential role in the decision to report to police. For adolescents who disclose that they have been sexually assaulted, the decision to report to police is often made in conjunction with parents, family members, teachers, and/or other professionals. By virtue of their age, adolescents are not considered able to make decisions and understand the implications of reporting to police. Adolescents may not report to police because they do not perceive their sexual-assault experience as legitimate, or they may fear the consequences of their parents’ knowledge of an assault (e.g. the parents may blame them, or restrict their activities).

Linda S Williams found that women were more likely to report a rape to the police if the circumstances of the attack corresponded to the “classic” rape situation. A woman must first recognize her experience as a sexual assault prior to reporting it. Evidence that fits the criteria of a “real rape” will help convince a survivor and her supports that she has, indeed, been sexually assaulted. A study conducted by Margaret J. McGregor, Ellen Wiebe, Stephen A. Marion, and Cathy Livingstone of 958 cases examined at the Sexual Assault Service at Vancouver General Hospital over a five-year period from 1993 to 1997 suggested that

women who have been sexually assaulted by an assailant who is not a stranger, and those who have no physical injuries following an attack, are more reluctant to involve police. While acquaintance sexual assaults and date rapes are more common than attacks by strangers, they also remain largely underreported and in turn reinforce the social myth of what constitutes a “genuine” rape.

The Role and Response of the Police in the Criminal Justice System

Police are considered to be the gatekeepers to the criminal justice system, and the process of attrition in sexual assault cases is often related to the discretion of individual officers. Police decide if a report of sexual assault is considered a crime or is “no-crime” (i.e. labelled “unfounded”). They function as the initial screen to the criminal justice system through their interviewing and charging practices, and control the official crime rate by selectively choosing the cases in which charges will be laid. The police have a great deal of discretion to define what incidents are criminal acts and worthy of investigation.

The literature has well documented women’s largely negative experiences of reporting to the police. The prosecution of rapists has been termed “the second rape” because the victim is “twice traumatized”—once by the offender, and then again by the authorities. Research in the area substantiates that as “gatekeepers” to the criminal legal process, police officers play a vital role. The police evaluate sexual assault cases using the same societal standards that have established the “real rape” as genuine and true. Changing the nature of cases brought to the criminal justice system would encourage a re-definition of policing away from the traditional crime-fighting model that many feminists (and others) find problematic (Gartner and Macmillan 423). The larger issue is that the entrenched

patriarchal values in our society tolerate and accept some degree of male violence against women. Holding only a handful of perpetrators accountable for their actions does little to curb the widespread incidence of woman abuse. As a result, many young women struggle with naming their experience as a sexual assault when they apply the narrow societal standards of the “real rape.” The high incidence of sexual assault among women, especially young adolescents, coupled with the fact that it is severely underreported is a cause for serious concern.

Methodology

This research project was conducted from a feminist perspective. Feminist research is “for” women and should reflect the interests of women. The purpose of this study was to hear from young women about their perceptions of the police and to ascertain the meanings they made of their experiences. I wanted to focus on the participants’ reports of what they perceived to be supportive or unsupportive actions, versus pre-defining these acts for them. I accepted each survivor’s subjective interpretation of the definition of sexual assault as the truth.

The participants were females aged 12 to 17 years old at the time when they were sexually assaulted. To be included in the study, the participants must have made a formal report of the sexual assault to the police. Nine adolescents participated in two focus groups and three adolescents participated in individual interviews with the researcher held in the spring of 2002. Participants were primarily recruited from hospital-based sexual assault treatment centres located in southwestern Ontario.

The data for this article were collected in several forms: a quantitative questionnaire, focus group discussions, and personal interviews. Following completion of the focus groups and individual interviews, themes were identified within the discus-

sions. At this point, emergent codes were refined and applied to the transcript data to identify and organize the data.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The young women in the research study ranged in age at the time of their attendance from 13 to 18. At the time of the sexual assault and report to police, the average age of the young women was 14.25. Sixty-six per cent (n=8) of the young women self-identified their race as white. The other 33 per cent (n=4) reported their race as South American, South Asian, or West Indian. English was the first language of 83 per cent (n=10).

In 100 per cent (n=12) of the cases, the young women were sexually assaulted by a male perpetrator. The majority of the cases that were reported to the police met the criteria of a “real rape” which includes: the seriousness of the assault; location of the attack is in public; the assailant is a stranger to the survivor; there is a threat of harm or use of force; the survivor suffers physical injuries and she vigorously resists. In 75 per cent of the situations (n=9), the sexual assault was committed either by a stranger, a significantly older acquaintance, or by multiple perpetrators. The low number of date rapes reported to the police in this study is consistent with the literature. This trend contributes to an official crime rate that over-represents the less typical, but more socially acceptable, sexual assault. Even with most of the assaults reported in this study fitting the “real rape” definition, charges were not laid in the majority of cases (n=7). There was no direct correlation between charges laid and the relationship to the perpetrator. In fact, the young woman who reported the sexual assault that most closely resembled the “genuine” rape endured the greatest scrutiny by the police.

In 33 per cent (n=4) of the cases,

the perpetrators were acquaintances of the survivor. An acquaintance was defined as someone known to the survivor, but not considered a friend. In 25 per cent (n=3) of the cases, the young women were friends with the perpetrator(s) and in one case the survivor was sexually assaulted by a boyfriend. In 50 per cent (n=6) of the sexual assaults, the survivors were attacked by someone within their peer group. The age of these perpetrators ranged from 12 to 20 years old; the average age was 16. In the remaining 50 per cent of the cases, the perpetrator was older than the survivor and ranged in estimated age from 24 to 64 years old, with an average age of 44.

While the participants shared many struggles and feelings common among most women who are sexually assaulted, there were some unique differences. In only 33 per cent (n=4) of the cases was it the survivor’s decision to contact the police to report the sexual assault. In 66 per cent (n=8) of the cases, the decision to report was made by someone else, or with the pressure of someone else, as defined by the participants. The

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majority of the sexual assaults, 58 per cent (n=7), were reported within the first 24 hours of the attack. The other sexual assaults were, with one exception, reported within a day of the attack,¹ to a month after it happened. The single exception was reported over four months after the attack.

Based on their age and maturity level, these survivors had less autonomy to make their own decisions. These young women were subject to greater influence by the adults in their lives such as parents, teachers, counselors, and the police. The young women were aware of their lack of power and how in turn this contributed to their being socially controlled. These survivors had fewer avail-

no charges were laid by police. According to the young women, the most commonly cited reason given by police for not charging was that there was not enough evidence to establish a sexual assault had occurred. From the survivors' understanding, either no reason or other reasons were given: she was to blame for letting the perpetrators in her house; the police had more important mat-

potential consequences that might be meted out by the criminal justice system.

In most of the cases of stranger assaults, the young women related that they had no time to think about how the police would respond to them. They defined their attack as a "real rape" and those around them automatically called for help. One young woman explained that she was

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able choices and faced greater personal consequences from adult authority figures than college-aged and older women who are sexually assaulted. The young women commonly related a sense of frustration and a feeling of being "stuck" due to their dependency on others.

In 42 per cent (n=5) of the cases, charges were laid by police. One case remained open because no perpetrator was ever apprehended. In cases where charges were laid, the police often acted within three days of the report to make an arrest. In one case, the police made an arrest over one week after the sexual assault; in another, an arrest was made more than four weeks after the attack. No medical treatment was received following the assault by 33 per cent (n=4) of the survivors. 66 per cent (n=8) of the survivors went to a Sexual Assault Treatment Centre at their local hospital to receive medical treatment within 72 hours of the sexual assault. In six out of eight of these cases (75 per cent), the survivors chose to complete a Sexual Assault Evidence Kit (SAEK). In the six cases where a SAEK was done, 83 per cent (n=5) resulted in either charges being laid by police, or likely to be laid, should a perpetrator be caught.

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ters with which to deal; the perpetrator was 12 years old and therefore too young to charge.

Expectations About Reporting Sexual Assault to Police

In general, the young women in the study related that they had positive expectations about reporting the sexual assault to the police, and expected that they would be believed. There was a strong common theme among the survivors that the police would take the sexual assault seriously and would act accordingly. Many of the young women expressed fear of the perpetrator(s) and thought that going to the police would increase their personal safety and give them a sense of closure. Even though, in the majority of the cases, the decision to report was not made solely by the survivor, the young women expected that the police would respond in a caring, cooperative manner and start an immediate investigation that would result in the arrest and imprisonment of the perpetrator. A shared assumption among the participants was that the sexual assault was a crime and that the assailant should be punished. The young women understood the implications of reporting and were quite prepared for the severity of the

taught from early childhood to call the police in an emergency situation, which is what occurred. Based on the circumstances of the crime, all of the young women went forward to the police with the assumption that they would be believed.

What Did the Young Women Actually Experience?

An overwhelming theme among the survivors was that the police minimized the sexual assault and the impact that it had on them. A young woman stated: "[The police] try to minimize it. They make you think it wasn't that bad. But then you start thinking well if it wasn't so bad why would I feel like this?" The survivors' fear was not often acknowledged by the police, nor did they recognize the inherent violence of the sexual assault. As one survivor commented, "it is a lot easier to say that you should have done something, than actually do it." For example, one young woman related:

[The police officers] were both brutal and mean and kept coming out with all these questions and they thought I was lying to them. I was scared to death [so] I told the police and they thought I was lying.

It was commonly related that the police officers they reported to were “rude,” “cold,” “insensitive,” and “condescending.” Several young women were informed by police that they had higher priority crimes to deal with than their sexual assaults. It is uncertain whether these officers were referring to their own workload or that of the police department in general. All of the young women included in this study reported their sexual assault in geographic areas that had specially trained police units that prepared detectives to conduct sexual assault investigations. Thus, these officers would spend all of their time investigating sexual assault cases rather than a variety of crimes. What, then, were these higher-priority crimes?

The overwhelming majority of the young women felt that the police did not believe them, as intimated through their attitude and by the types of questions that the police asked. This was a common feeling among all of the survivors regardless of the circumstances of the sexual assault. Blaming, intrusive, and insensitive questions were commonly recalled by the young women. The police were skeptical both of sexual assaults that were committed by strangers and by perpetrators known to the survivors. The young women felt that the methods of questioning used by the police insinuated that they were lying. A great deal of time was spent looking for a young woman’s underlying reason for reporting rather than on apprehending the perpetrator. A common ulterior motive attributed to young women by police was the assumption that she consented to sexual activity and then needed an excuse to deny it later. These kinds of interviewing tactics are more appropriate for the police to use when interrogating a suspect. The police seemed to consider the young women as “suspects” first before they could identify them as “victims.”

One young woman stated:

It seemed like they were making

sure I wasn’t lying. I was like why would I lie and in my case I had no one to get back at. I wasn’t doing it for revenge or anything.... They talked to my boyfriend and asked him questions like ‘Was she ever angry that day it happened?’ Then they tested him to make sure that I didn’t have sex with him and was saying that this is where the semen came from.... The whole time they made me feel like I was eight and that I didn’t even know what I was talking about.

The theme of the consistent, unchanging story seemed to impress the police officers the most. The first account was taken as “the truth.” The young women related feeling compelled to stick to their original story while being told to “just tell the truth.” To test out the veracity of their statements the police would often ask numerous, in-depth questions or would re-phrase the same question and ask it in a repetitive manner. It was speculated that the police change the questions around “to trip you up.” Any changes to the original version of the incident would raise doubts. If the police were highly suspicious of a young woman’s story, they would conduct numerous interviews to review the facts. One young woman stated:

To make someone re-live something over and over again is not always the best thing. That is when you get confused because you start getting scared that they are not going to believe you and then you start doubting yourself. You are like, “Well, maybe I did do something wrong.”

A common defense tactic used by the survivors was to only give the police what they wanted to hear. Young women were scared to provide further detail that they later remembered for fear of losing credibility in the eyes of the police. Could police investigations be re-structured to thoroughly scrutinize accused as-

sailants rather than almost solely focusing on the women making the reports?

Another common theme was that of “feeling low talking to the police, like [she] had done something wrong.” Several young women related that the police implied by their actions and statements that they were lying. This was a frightening experience for them and made them doubt themselves and their recollections about the sexual assault. The survivors related that disclosing intimate details about the sexual assault to an authority figure was a humiliating experience. One young woman related that the police officer in her case was also uncomfortable with using this graphic language:

The detective was male and when we had to get down to the nitty gritty, he was reluctant to use the proper names of the anatomy. So I just kind of said it and he kind of blushed, like he was almost embarrassed to say it. I thought that was really old fashioned and I didn’t think that was a good way for him to react. It was almost like the mentality, “sex is dirty” in the way he didn’t want to say it.

The survivors attributed the treatment by police to several factors. A common reason cited was that the police thought they were making it up. Thus, the police posed questions searching for a revenge motive (against the perpetrator) or some other self-serving purpose, such as attention seeking or problems at home.

The survivors assumed that their young age and gender also contributed to the police officers’ behaviour towards them. Several young women were accused of “going along” with the sexual assault, meaning the police believed it was an instance of consensual sexual behaviour, not a crime. Some survivors were told that they “did not act like they had just been sexually assaulted.” No participants were directly told that the perpetra-

tor was responsible for the sexual assault.

Several of the participants in this study were warned by police that they could be charged with making a false report. Police commonly cite the number of false allegations of sexual assault to account for upwards of 50 per cent of reports.² The official false reporting rate for sexual assault is the same as for other

to their lack of life experience and limited control over their lives, they did not challenge the *status quo* or the institutions that uphold the dominant values. Young women should not be pressured to conform to the image of the “good” victim in order to receive support and validation.

Police attitudes relay expectations to women about the mythical concept of the “perfect” victim and, in

I would (report) even though the outcome may not be good. It makes you feel safe and that they are going to try to help you, even though they may not think you are telling the truth.

If a friend disclosed that she was sexually assaulted, 75 per cent (n=9) of the young women would advise her to report to police. Of the re-

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crimes—around three per cent (Peel Committee on Sexual Assault 6). A future study may focus on the stories of young women who have been charged with public mischief following their report of a sexual assault to police.

Myths and Stereotypes

Myths and stereotypes about sexual assault are pervasive within our society, and on an individual basis are incredibly hurtful and destructive to survivors. Participants cited victim-blaming statements, often used to justify the way police treated them. One attractive young woman reported being told by a male police officer, “Because of the way I look, I should expect to be treated like this.” Adolescence is a confusing time of life, which most people struggle to get through and try to make sense of all the contradictions. At the same time, adolescents are searching for acceptance and validation. They are extremely susceptible to myths that range from victim worthiness to victim blame. These young women had all internalized societal messages about sexual violence, and had made adjustments to accommodate these conflicting messages that challenged their beliefs about themselves. Due

turn, women try not to disappoint them. The reality is that the police are more motivated to pursue such “ideal” cases. The police are similar to parents in the shared belief that the way to protect young women from sexual assault is to keep them locked up safely at home. This preventative approach promotes the value of women as property and does not hold perpetrators accountable for sexual violence. Many of the young women in this study encountered defensive reactions from male supports; they wanted to punish the perpetrator to uphold the survivor’s virtue and reputation. These paternalistic attitudes have been documented in the literature and contribute to the under-reporting of sexual assaults.

Future Police Reporting

The participants rated their overall experience with the police on a scale of zero (negative) to ten (positive). The average rating was a four; responses ranged from zero to eight. Despite negative personal experiences and feelings, 58 per cent (n=7) of the young women stated that in the future, they would report a sexual assault to the police. One young woman stated:

maintaining 25 per cent (n=3), one stated that she was not sure how she would respond, one related that she would provide her friend with information and let her decide how she wanted to proceed, and only one related that she would advise against reporting to police. Overall, the perception of the safety net of the criminal justice system remained intact for most of the young women. One explanation is that the young women may have thought that in the future, they would be reporting a “real” rape versus the more common type of acquaintance sexual assault.

Forty-two per cent (n=5) said that personally, they would not report another sexual assault to the police. A common reason for not reporting a sexual assault in the future was the fear of not being believed by the police. Several survivors related that they would not want to go through that experience again. These young women disclosed that they did not think that the police would do anything and they would rather deal with it on their own. They had also lost faith in the criminal justice system. One young woman disclosed that she had been recently sexually assaulted and chose not to report it to the police based on her prior experience:

I didn't even bother calling the police because I got no justice from them before so why would they help me again?"

Reasons that were given that would prevent a young woman from reporting a sexual assault to the police were the poor treatment of victims, the fear of not being believed, the harassment and/or judgment by peers, fear of retaliation by the perpetrator and the difficulty in telling parents.

The young women related a sense of entitlement to access the criminal justice system and optimism about this institution. It was widely believed that there are some good police officers, and that under different circumstances, there might be an alternate outcome. Several survivors did not think that it was fair to judge all police officers based on their one experience and were optimistic that things will change in the future. The survivors were far less judgmental about the police, than the police were towards them. The police were not seen as solely responsible for the failings of the criminal justice system. Reasons to encourage reporting a sexual assault had more to do with holding the perpetrator accountable and to prevent him from raping again rather than avoiding the police-reporting experience. It was generally agreed that staying quiet will not help or change anything.

To abandon legal strategies altogether would be no solution at all; rather it would be to concede defeat, leaving the law unchallenged, our silence taken to imply that we had no criticisms to make (Gregory and Lees 80).

Reporting to police and participating in this research study are ways that contribute to uncovering the hidden truth about the impact of sexual violence.

Conclusion

Sexual assault is a highly under-re-

ported crime in Canada and around the world. For most women, a barrier to reporting is the fear of not being believed by the police. The young women in this study who came forward had positive expectations that the police would take what had happened to them very seriously. None of the young women expected to be treated as liars, or as if they had something to gain by disclosing the most humiliating experience of their lives to virtual strangers whose job is to serve and protect. After the initial shock, most of the adolescents expected that the police would see their side of the story and begin to treat them like "victims" who were worthy of empathy and respect. For most, this was not the case. Women should expect that reporting to police will be a difficult experience that might negatively impact their emotional and psychological recovery following a sexual assault. Women should also expect that even if the attack they suffered is classified as a "real" rape, their credibility will be thoroughly scrutinized. At this point, if a woman meets all of the criteria of a "worthy" victim, it is still uncertain whether the perpetrator(s) will be charged. If women are going to choose to report, this choice should be an informed one.

The young women in this study demonstrated that they are very flexible and adaptable in the way that they conform to the multiple expectations that society has set out for them. Most adolescents are so busy just trying to fit in that they tend not to question dominant societal values until they experience a life-altering event such as a sexual assault. The young women who participated in this study were openly critical about their experience of reporting a sexual assault to police. At the same time, they found this poor treatment to be somewhat tolerable. The young women in this study continued to maintain hope and faith in the police as part of the larger criminal justice system. They also felt a strong sense of entitlement to legally and publicly

hold perpetrators responsible for their crimes. For these survivors, the perception of the public safety net is still intact.

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¹In order for the police to collect forensic evidence from a crime scene, they place tremendous value on the survivor immediately identifying the sexual assault as a crime and reporting it. It becomes more difficult for the police to collect corroborating physical evidence of a sexual assault after 24 hours has passed. In the questionnaire that participants completed, I asked how long after the sexual assault took place, was the report made to police? Less than 24 hours, 24 hours to three days, four days to seven days, eight days to 31 days, 32 days to three months, four to twelve months, over one year.

²This is based on my professional experience with sexual assault officers who have provided this statistic on several occasions at community meetings with sexual assault service providers.

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About the Guest Editors...

Beverly Bain is a black lesbian feminist anti-violence anti-racism/anti-oppression educator and trainer. She has been an activist and worked in the feminist anti-violence movement for more than 20 years. She is currently a graduate student in Women's Studies at York University in Toronto.

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Diane Delaney is the Coordinator of PATHS, The Provincial Association of Transition Houses and Services of Saskatchewan. Diane has worked in the shelter movement in Ontario and Saskatchewan for 20 years and has an MA in Social Welfare Policy from McMaster University.

Daisy Kler is a Punjabi, radical feminist. She has worked as a front line rape crisis and transition house worker for seven years at Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter where she is a collective member.

Lee Lakeman has spent more than 20 years doing front-line anti-violence work. She is the founding executive director of one of the first transition houses in the country, the Woodstock Emergency Shelter established in 1974 in Woodstock, Ontario. Her most recent publication is *Obsession with Intent: Violence Against Women (Black Rose, 2005)*.

Yasmin Jiwani is a faculty member in the Department of Communications at Concordia University, Montreal. Prior to her move to Montreal, she was the executive coordinator and principal researcher at the FREDA Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children.

Sherry Lewis is the Executive Director of the Native Women's Association of Canada.

Fran Odette is the Program Coordinator of the Women with Disabilities and Deaf Women's Program at Education Wife Assault since 2003. She has been working in the violence against women movement for approximately 15 years, with a particular focus on issues impacting women with disabilities and Deaf women.

Lucya Spencer is a community activist in the Ottawa Carleton area and is currently the Executive Director of Immigrant Women Services Ottawa (IWSO), a community-based agency in Ottawa providing services to women and children of diverse cultural background who are victims/survivors of violence.

Annabel Webb is co-founder of Justice for Girls and currently works as an advocate in the organization. She has been a feminist activist for over a decade and has worked to prevent violence against women and girls in various contexts including frontline anti-violence organizations, university women's groups, street outreach programs, and anti-poverty coalitions.