Educators, students and parents universally acknowledge the importance of safe schools. If students do not feel safe, there is not much chance of them learning and reaching their full potential. At the extreme, students may face significant threats to their life and to their long-term physical and psychological well-being. Many students are affected on a daily basis by bullying and harassment, often inflicted because of their gender.

Recent studies point out that educators also suffer long-term effects from the impact of abuse and violence on themselves and their colleagues. Solutions are not simple. There is considerable debate on the underlying causes and potential cures for the problem.

It is difficult even to start a discussion on the topic of violence against girls without a great deal of resistance and backlash.

Common responses include:
- Aren’t girls just as violent as boys?
- Why are you picking on boys?
- Boys are victims too but don’t seek help.
- I am tired of everyone trying to be politically correct!
- Why can’t we just talk about violence in general?

Violence against girls is a significant social issue that needs to be understood and addressed by educators. Resistance needs to be addressed directly and begins by grasping the nature and extent of the problem. Discussing violence against girls does not minimize other forms of violence nor deny the reality that boys are victimized by boys. In fact, creating a school climate where violence against girls is no longer tolerated and respectful relationships are fostered will offer protection for everyone.

National studies suggest that girls are subjected to a range of violent behaviours and attitudes. Girls are more likely to be victims of sexual and physical assault by family members than are boys. Some groups of girls are most at risk. According to the University of Western Ontario report, In the Best Interest of Girls, Phase 2, by H. Berman and Y. Iwani, 75 per cent of Aboriginal women under the age of 35 have experienced sexual abuse, and half of those are under 14 years of age. One quarter of girls in dating relationships report physical and sexual abuse and young women are in the highest risk group for intimate homicides.

According to the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services’ Domestic Violence Death Review Committee’s 2007 Annual Report, in Ontario there have been approximately 30 domestic homicides a year from 2002 to 2006, and over 50 per cent involve men killing their intimate female partners. We need to understand the nature of gender-based violence and the extent of sexism that allows perpetrators to target girls/women. Some of the issues that must be confronted are so deeply ingrained in society that the tendency is to ignore or minimize them.

DEFINITION AND RESEARCH ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence refers to any form of abuse—including verbal, psychological, physical and economic—that is based on an individual's gender and is intended to control, humiliate or harm that individual. This form of violence is generally directed by boys and men against girls and women and is based on attitude or prejudice, conscious or unconscious, individual or institutional, that subordinates an individual or a group of people based on sex and gender identity. The foundation for this behaviour includes beliefs that privilege men and
subordinate and deignate women.

In 1995, OSSTF/FEESO, the Women's Directorate, the Violence Prevention Secretariat and the Ministry of Education collaborated on a study entitled, The Jake's Over—Student to Student Sexual Harassment in Secondary Schools, which found that over 80 per cent of female students reported that they had been sexually harassed in a school setting. Researchers discovered that the majority of male students surveyed seemed to take the harassment less seriously than female students, particularly when speaking of being harassed by a female. The study was one of the first to suggest that sexual harassment was a major problem in Ontario schools and that it needed to be understood as part of a continuum of school violence.

Helene Berman, Scotiabank Research Chair at the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children in London, and her colleagues in research centres across Canada found a high level of harassment reported in the daily lives of girls and inadequate responses from adults in authority to confront the issue. Adults often took a "they're just kids, they'll outgrow it" or "boys will be boys" stance in response to sexual harassment and other forms of violence in the everyday lives of girls. Researchers point out that the problems girls experience are often ignored. Girls may internalise the erroneous idea that their role as women is to support patriarchal power structures favouring the choices of boys and men.

The pervasiveness of violence against girls was underscored in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) review of schools on January 10, 2006 after the shooting death of Jordan Moussa on May 23, 2007 at C.W. Jefferys Secondary School. Gender-based violence was reported at alarming rates. In one study, one in 14 girls reported that they had been sexually assaulted in the last two years. In an answer to the question "has someone forced you to have sex against your will?" and one in five reported knowing someone who had been sexually assaulted. Sadly, eight out of 10 students would not report their victimization to police or school officials.

In February 2008, our colleagues at the Centre for Prevention Science, a division of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), completed a major survey in 23 secondary schools on adolescent risk behaviour. The study, entitled The Impact of Sexual Harassment Victimization by Peers on Subsequent Adolescent Victimization and Adjustment: A Longitudinal Study, found that almost half of the students (43 per cent) reported experiencing sexual harassment in grade 9. Although the rates were similar for girls and boys, the types of harassment experiences differed. The girls were more likely than boys to be the recipient of sexual jokes, comments and unwanted touching, while boys were more likely to be subjected to homonegative slurs. Sexual harassment was associated with a range of negative outcomes for girls that included suicidal thoughts, self-harm, maladaptive dating, early dating, dating substance use and poor grades. The impact of sexual harassment victimization persisted from grades 9 to 11 and was associated with higher risk for other forms of relationship violence at grade 11. Sexual harassment of girls contributed to risk for both internalizing and externalizing problems within a period of two to almost a half year later. Boys experienced many of the same issues, but at a less severe rate.

It is interesting to note that girls are harassed because they are girls and boys are most likely to be harassed because they do not conform to perceptions of ideal masculinity and are perceived to be too feminine or to be gay.

Many factors promote violence against girls in our society. Violence doesn't begin in school. The school reflects issues in the broader society. In some cases, violence begins at home with children who grow up aware of or exposed to domestic violence. These experiences, in turn, shape individual attitudes and beliefs about healthy relationships. The media in all its various forms, from videogames to denial and false information about sexual roles and opportunities for girls, may be at the root of gender violence. The strategies to prevent it must be broad, multi-faceted and comprehensive.

> Complete a survey on the extent of harassment, including their views on why such behaviour is not reported and what they perceive as potential solutions.

The findings should then be analyzed for action planning by the individual school committees to tailor a local response and respect the unique characteristics of each community.

> Integrate the topic of violence against girls into the curriculum at every opportunity.

The Strategies for Healthy Youth Relationships has launched the Fourth R: Relationship Based Violence Prevention in Ontario and many other school boards across Canada as a new campaign to promote healthy adolescent relationships that centre on equality and respect.


> Create opportunities to practice the necessary skills to intervene in situations that involve violence against girls.

We have had tremendous success with a play called Missed Opportunities that deals with the impact of domestic violence on a mother and daughter as well as the potential role of friends, family and co-workers to intervene. In November 2009, a province-wide, youth-centred conference featuring diverse voices and perspectives will identify approaches to menschastic violence and the promotion of healthy and equal relationships.

> Celebrate successes in order to sustain energy and commitment for these issues.

The TVDSI of our annual awards to high school students who have played a lead role in violence prevention efforts at their school. We hope these are displayed proudly as the football, hockey and basketball trophies. Look for opportunities to celebrate initiatives that address the need for healthy relationships and the importance of gender equality.

The website also provides teacher resources including a comprehensive listing of programs matched to the Ontario curriculum (www.toolsforchange.ca), OSSTF/FEESO is working with other education partners to examine the impact of media violence on students.

Sample curriculum in this area can be found at www.cmhc.ca.

> Raise awareness through well-publicized events that engage boys and men to address these issues without defensiveness.

We have partnered with Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) over the past three years for a Fathers' Day breakfast that brings student leaders and community members together to address the problem of violence against women.

Male speakers from sports and the arts inspire young men in their future role and responsibilities in this area.

> Develop a school policy that includes community partners like the police, shelters for abuse victims and sexual health clinics to support girls in the review and update policies and practices.

Inclusion of high school boys on such committees to advocate in schools on behalf of schools as conduct of code to ensure that gender-based violence is fully defined and that there are appropriate consequences for those who commit such offences.

> Offer training for future teachers as well as continuing education opportunities and professional development for existing teachers.

The University of Western Ontario's Faculty of Education offers core courses that train educators to work with male and female students. The former has a special focus on the education of males and the latter is designed for future teachers. The University of Western Ontario's Faculty of Education offers core courses that train educators to work with male and female students. The former has a special focus on the education of males and the latter is designed for future teachers.