

# Sexual Harassment: Everyday Violence in the Lives of Girls and Women

Sexual harassment is one of the most insidious, yet pervasive, forms of violence that affects all girls, not merely those traditionally thought to be vulnerable or at risk. Although harassment in the workplace has been the focus of considerable attention during the last decade, there is a growing recognition that girls experience varied forms of sexual harassment, and that this behavior begins at a surprisingly early age. This article examines the plight of the "girl child" and presents findings from the first phase of a national action research project currently being conducted by the Canadian Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence. A major objective of this project is to examine how violence becomes "normalized" in the lives of girls and young women. Implications for nurses, including strategies aimed at encouraging resistance among this population, are addressed. Key words: *adolescents, girls, health, sexual harassment, violence*

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**D**URING THE last decade, there has been growing awareness that violence is a significant public health problem with important consequences for individuals, families, and communities. In nursing, this realization is evident by the appearance of numerous studies related to woman abuse,<sup>1-11</sup> children of battered women,<sup>12-15</sup> elder abuse,<sup>16</sup> childhood sexual abuse,<sup>17-19</sup> and community violence.<sup>20</sup> Other indicators of nursing's interest in the problem of violence include the publication of several books devoted entirely to the topic of violence,<sup>21,22</sup> the inclusion of chapters related to various aspects of violence in most nursing textbooks, the introduction of classes on violence as an integral component of many undergraduate and graduate nursing curricula, and the emergence of a steadily growing international organization, the Nurses' Network on Violence against Women International, which provides a forum for

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nurses to engage in dialogue, reflection, and critique regarding research and programs related to violence. Although it is clear that the nature and complexity of violence necessitate a combined effort among health, social service, community, and legal providers, the critical role of nursing within this constellation is evident. Today there is little question that the topic of violence is a significant issue within the domain of nursing.

As a result of current knowledge and understandings regarding the problem of violence, numerous prevention and intervention programs have been implemented. These initiatives are, without doubt, important. However, they fail to take into consideration the needs of another large group of victims, girls who encounter sexual harassment as a common occurrence in their everyday lives. With few exceptions, research related to girls is subsumed under the broader categories of children, youth, and adolescents. When gender is a central focus of study, the emphasis tends to be exclusively on adult women, with little attention to the issues faced by girls. Because many of the behaviors that are associated with sexual harassment have historically been considered acceptable in many contexts, the problem has generally not been taken seriously. In reality, the effects of this form of violence may be very similar to those suffered by recipients of other, more explicit, types of violence.<sup>23,24</sup>

In recognition of the obstacles and challenges faced by girls and young women today, a multiphased national action research project is currently being conducted by researchers and community leaders from the Canadian Alliance of Five Research Centres on Violence. This alliance comprises five centers across Canada that were

established in 1992 as part of a federal initiative to promote research related to violence against women and children following the 1989 murder of 14 women engineering students in Montreal. The current project, "The Development of a National Action Strategy Aimed at Violence Prevention and the Girl Child," has as one of its goals the development of a national action plan to address the problem of violence as it affects the "girl child." A primary objective is an explication of the diverse ways in which girls and young women are socialized to expect violence in their lives. A second aim of the project is to examine how social policies, legislation, and institutions alleviate, or perpetuate, the problems faced by this population.

The theoretical and methodological perspectives that have guided the conceptualization and implementation of this project are derived from the principles of feminist theory and participatory action research. Assumptions upon which this work is based are:

- Girls and young women are socialized to expect violence in their everyday lives.
- As a result of their socialization experiences, violence becomes "normalized" for girls.
- Violence occurs in both subtle and explicit ways, including psychological, emotional, physical, and sexual.
- Girls from all socioeconomic, racial, geographic, cultural, and ethnic groups are affected by the multiple forms of violence.

Implicit in these assumptions is the assertion that traditional notions of "girls at risk" may not be useful when addressing the topic of violence. Instead, given the pervasive and insidious nature of many forms of violence,

including sexual harassment, all girls must be considered to be vulnerable and "at risk."

One facet of this research included focus group interviews that were conducted with girls by each of the five centers. In Ontario, focus groups were conducted throughout the province and included girls from rural and urban areas as well as from diverse ethnic and cultural groups. In addition, focus groups were held with community leaders, researchers, and activists who work in a range of settings with girls and young women.

This article examines the plight of the "girl child" today, with particular attention to the experience of sexual harassment. In order to place the issue into a meaningful context, a historical perspective, which includes a critique of the dominant theories of (male) child development, is presented. Findings from the Ontario focus groups are shared, and strategies aimed at encouraging resistance among girls and young women are addressed.

### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE GIRL CHILD**

Although the effects of gender discrimination on girls have been acknowledged for many years, it was not until the 1980s that girls were put on the international agenda when UNICEF adopted the phrase "the girl child." In recognition of the deprivation of girls as a gendered concern, several international organizations followed suit, proclaiming 1990 "The Year of the Girl Child," and the 1990s as "The Decade of the Girl Child." At the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the plight of girl children was put on the platform as a significant topic for discussion.

The impetus for this movement came initially from women in developing countries throughout the world. During the early stages of this project, members of the research team raised concerns about the phrase "the girl child." Some questioned its relevance to a North American context; others felt that the term was demeaning. Many of us had spent years in the women's movement during the 1970s arguing that girls should be recognized by the term "women," which was considered more respectful. However, as we have learned during the course of this study, there are many languages throughout the world where there is no term for "girl." Instead, child is generically male, and girls and girlhood are concepts that simply do not exist. Even in North American cultures where there are distinct terms for girls and boys, gender-based concerns are often obscured by the more common focus on children and youth. It is in this context that the phrase has come to be used in our research, and it is used throughout this article.

### **The crash of adolescent girls**

Adolescence is a crucial developmental period for both girls and boys. However, research findings indicate that girls tend to experience more psychological distress than their male counterparts.<sup>25,26</sup> Although this observation is disturbing, it is not a recent phenomenon. Earlier this century, Freud spoke about a "fresh wave of repression"<sup>27(p86)</sup> that girls experience during puberty.

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Psychoanalysts Horney,<sup>28</sup> Deutsch,<sup>29</sup> and Thompson<sup>30</sup> spoke of this stage as one of passivity for girls. Horney associated this period with feelings of inadequacy and inferiority due to young women taking on foreign, male-defined values and goals. Deutsch noted that prior to puberty, there is a period of increased activity followed by marked passivity during adolescence. According to Thompson, during adolescence girls experience a “shutting down.” For all three theorists, these experiences were perceived as a normative process, understood as a consequence of penis envy and the castration complex.

In recent years, the psychological distress experienced by many girls during adolescence has received considerable attention, especially in the media. A 1990 poll of more than 3000 girls between the ages of 9 and 15, commissioned by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), concluded that girls who had previously displayed confidence and enthusiasm about themselves and the world around them suddenly experienced self-doubt and insecurity.<sup>31</sup> Those who had once enjoyed considerable success in academic performance unexpectedly found themselves struggling for recognition and achievement in the classroom.

Pipher, in her book *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*,<sup>26</sup> aptly illuminates their plight.

Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence. Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves. They crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle. In early adolescence, studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet. They lose their resiliency and optimism and become less curious and inclined to take risks. They lose their assertive, energetic

and “tomboyish” personalities and become more deferential, self-critical and depressed. They report great unhappiness with their own bodies.<sup>(p19)</sup>

Various authors have described this phenomenon as loss of voice,<sup>32</sup> disavowing the self,<sup>33</sup> and colliding with a brick wall.<sup>25</sup> Internally, adolescence is a time marked by conflict, self-doubt, and an exaggerated need for approval. Acceptance by peers is paramount and is often sought after at the expense of self-respect. Developmentally, adolescents are searching for an identity, struggling with sexuality and sex-role identification, and developing a value system that will determine their lives.

In an effort to understand the patterns and processes of child development, many theories have been put forth and used widely. Unfortunately, many of the dominant frameworks designed to foster an understanding of child development are fraught with a multitude of androcentric biases and fail to elucidate the uniqueness of growing up male or female.

### Theories of (male) child development

Vandenberg<sup>34</sup> described the life phase of childhood as “becoming at home in the world.” The way in which children strive to build a sense of coherence out of the family in which they are raised, and the larger society in which they participate, how they learn to “become at home in the world,” is a formidable undertaking, even in the best of circumstances. When the child's world includes repeated exposure to violence, as is often the case for girls, the task becomes enormous.

Erickson's eight stages of man delineate developmental crises that must be resolved

at each stage in order to be able to move on to the next stage. With the exception of infancy, when the developmental task is to achieve a sense of trust, and in which development is grounded in the experience of relationship, all successive stages are characterized by increasing degrees of separation and individuation. For girls and young women, however, research has shown that interconnections and relationships are typically more important than they are for boys and young men.<sup>25</sup> As Miller<sup>35</sup> has observed, women's sense of self evolves in the context of important relationships in which the goal is the development of mutually empathic relationships.

The depiction of childhood as an orderly progression through a series of stages and tasks may also be problematic for girls and young women. According to Douvan and Edelson,<sup>36</sup> the development of identity formation and intimacy among girls occurs simultaneously, rather than sequentially as it does for boys. The complexity and competing needs of the psychological tasks posed to adolescent girls are confusing. When chronic exposure to violence is part of the girls' everyday reality, their ability to negotiate this phase of life may be further jeopardized, causing them to make choices that limit opportunities.

Kohlberg<sup>37</sup> has developed an elaborate hierarchy of moral stages and has been widely acknowledged as the leading expert on the moral development of children. His influence on those attempting to understand child behavior is profound. The stages that he posits as universal, cross-cultural principles were derived from the responses of 84 boys to hypothetical moral dilemmas. Although Kohlberg's schema includes six stages of moral development, his limited research on

girls has shown that they rarely move beyond the third stage, where morality is understood in interpersonal terms, and where goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others. Gilligan<sup>25</sup> has argued that Kohlberg's stages do not reflect the way in which females approach and resolve moral issues. Within his framework, girls are unlikely to find themselves at the higher end of the morality spectrum, which involves the abstraction of moral principles outside of the context in which moral decisions are made.

The common weakness in the dominant theories about the growth and development of children is that development is conceptualized as a "normative" process, with emphasis on the orderly progression of the child and with little attention paid to differences based on gender. Further, these theories are derived almost exclusively from research with boys. Thus, the quality of embeddedness in social interaction and personal relationships that characterizes the lives of girls and women is not only a descriptive difference but also a developmental liability when the milestones of child and adolescent development are markers of increasing separation. Because girls tend to be more concerned with cultivating relationships with others than with establishing a separate identity, they will always be disadvantaged within developmental frameworks that value autonomy, separation, and independence above all else.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Defining sexual harassment is difficult given its amorphous nature and the fact that, in certain contexts, some of the behaviors it encompasses are deemed acceptable. According to Larkin,<sup>38</sup> sexual harassment is

an expression of sexism that reflects and reinforces the unequal power that exists between men and women in our patriarchal society. It is unwanted and unwelcome sexual behavior that interferes with everyday life. While put-downs and negative comments about one's gender are among the more common forms of sexual harassment, it is a problem that has many manifestations. Verbal sexual harassment may include demeaning comments, insults, invasive questions, whistling, racist comments and slurs, demands, threats, propositions, persistent invitations for dates, or harassing phone calls. Physical sexual harassment may include grabbing, touching, rubbing, threatening acts, flashing, or fondling. Alternatively, sexual harassment may be visual in nature and include invasive watching such as leering or ogling, sexual gesturing, pornographic material, or demeaning and disturbing graffiti.<sup>38</sup>

Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth<sup>39</sup> have suggested that sexual harassment is best conceptualized as one manifestation of the way in which sexual violence against women is condoned in society. These investigators spoke of a "rape culture" whereby violence against women and children is viewed on a continuum of behaviors, from sexual harassment, including unwanted sexual comments and innuendo at one end of the spectrum to rape at the opposite end.

A search of nursing databases from the last 5 years indicates that the nursing profession has largely overlooked the problem of sexual harassment. Several studies were uncovered that addressed sexual harassment of nurses in the workplace; only one study was found that related to the experience of unwanted sexual attention and its effects upon the health of adult women.<sup>40</sup> No published nursing studies addressed sexual harassment directed

toward the girl child. A search of databases outside of nursing, including psychology, sociology, education, and counseling, revealed a robust literature with respect to sexual harassment of college and university women<sup>41-43</sup> and harassment in the workplace, but again, very scant research related to girls.

Despite the relative lack of attention devoted to sexual harassment, several large surveys indicate that many young women in high schools encounter it daily. In one of the largest surveys, commissioned by the AAUW Foundation and released in 1993, it was reported that sexual harassment was experienced by 81% of girls, ages 9 to 15 years. Almost two thirds of the respondents indicated that they had told their harassers to stop; one third had used force; and over three fourths reported incidents of sexual harassment in their schools.<sup>44</sup> In a 1992 survey published in "Seventeen" magazine, responses from a nonscientific random sample of 2000 girls ages 9 to 19 years revealed similar findings. Eighty percent admitted that they had experienced sexual harassment and almost one half reported daily occurrences of unwanted sexual attention. Two thirds of these incidences were witnessed by other people and the most frequent site was the classroom, followed by the hallway and other locations on school property.<sup>45</sup>

In one Canadian survey, Bagley, Bolitho, and Bertrand<sup>23</sup> found that only 23% of their sample of 1025 adolescent women from western Canada had experienced sexual assault, including harassment. These authors noted, however, that the questionnaire used in their study asked about "more serious" dimensions of sexual harassment, including sexual assault. Thus, the more subtle forms of harassment were unlikely to be captured, resulting in the relatively lower reports of

sexual harassment. One particularly noteworthy finding from this research was that incidences of sexual harassment were not evenly distributed among their sample of girls from grades 7 through 12. Bagley et al noted that some of the adolescents in their research might have been sexually abused in the home. A frequent sequel of sexual abuse in the home is sexualized behaviors in the community, contributing to a risk of sexual revictimization. Further research, however, is needed to explore this relationship.

The ways in which sexual harassment affects health are not well understood. With respect to adult women, Jones and Remland<sup>46</sup> evaluated the costs and "benefits" associated with sexual harassment from the viewpoint of perpetrators as well as the victims. These authors concluded that women may perceive unwanted advances as bothersome, but that the costs are relatively minor. In contrast, Esacove<sup>40</sup> observed that women in her research experienced a "diminishing sense of self" and were affected, both physically and emotionally, by their encounters with sexual harassment.

In one of the larger studies related to the effects of workplace harassment upon adult women, Dansky and Kilpatrick<sup>24</sup> observed a broad range of physical and psychological costs. In this survey of 3006 women, ages 18 to 34 years, those who had been harassed were at significantly greater risk of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression than those who had not experienced harassment. Similar findings were reported by Charney and Russell,<sup>47</sup> who observed that sexual harassment is frequently associated with mental health impairments in adult women.

Research concerning the health effects of sexual harassment on girls and young women remains, for the most part, an unexamined

area. Several writers have observed a tendency among girls to drop out of school, to suffer from lowered self-esteem, depression, feeling and being unsafe in public places, eating disorders, and suicidal thoughts and attempts.<sup>31,38,45</sup> This line of investigation, however, is still relatively new, and much remains to be learned. It has only been in the last decade that we have begun to conceptualize violence as an important public health concern. However, based on current understandings about the relationship between sexual harassment and health among adult women, it is reasonable to speculate that subtle and explicit forms of violence, including sexual harassment, would jeopardize the physical and emotional health of girls and young women.

Although largely conceptualized as a "woman's" issue, several studies have claimed that males also may be targets of sexual harassment, and that efforts to eliminate sexual violence, including harassment, should be directed equally to males who are "victims."<sup>48</sup> This position was challenged by F. Rooney (unpublished manuscript, 1998), who noted that such a perspective would only have merit if boys and girls were equally subjected to sexual harassment. Overwhelmingly, however, the research supports the notion that boys harass and girls are harassed. According to Orenstein,<sup>31</sup> the behavior is less a statement about sexuality than an assertion of dominance. As Orenstein wrote:

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The prevalence of sexual harassment reminds us that boys learn at a very young age to see girls as less capable and less worthy of respect. One need only consider that the most shameful insult that one boy can hurl at another is still *girl!*. . . to understand how aware children are of female powerlessness, and how important it is for boys to distance themselves from that weakness in order to feel like men.<sup>(p116)</sup>

Although there are instances when girls harass boys, the meaning of the event is different. Many boys report that they like being sexually harassed by girls, which, by definition, means that they were not sexually harassed. Further, when boys experience adverse consequences, these are much less significant than those experienced by girls. For boys, harassment tends to be a jockeying for status among peers, whereas for girls it is a matter of being put in their place, of inferiority and subordination.

From this review of the literature, it is clear that sexual harassment occurs as a pervasive, pernicious, and highly public problem for girls. Despite this reality, there is still a sense that it is not taken seriously, that sexual harassment is often labeled as “teasing,” and that many harassing behaviors are viewed as normal adolescent rites of passage. Largely missing from studies conducted to date are the voices of girls relating their own perceptions, feelings, and experiences with this form of “everyday” violence.

### **LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF THE GIRL CHILD**

In our work on violence prevention and the girl child, it was important that we listen to what the girls had to say about their lives. In order to capture their voices, focus group interviews were conducted with ethnically

and geographically diverse groups of girls throughout the province of Ontario. Consistent with our perspective that all girls are vulnerable and “at risk,” we deliberately selected girls not typically included under the health and social services “safety net.” Two focus groups were held at a girls’ summer camp; one was conducted in a rural, northern Ontario community; one in a major metropolitan center; and one at a group home for girls who, for various reasons, were unable to live with their families of origin. In total, 33 girls participated in 5 focus groups. The sample ranged in age from 11 years to 16 years; 15 girls were 11 to 13 years and 18 girls were 14 to 16 years old. In addition, we conducted focus groups with community leaders, researchers, and activists who work with varied populations of girls and young women. These data are not presented here, but key points will be incorporated into the discussion as appropriate.

An interview guide developed for this research was used to elicit the girls’ thoughts about growing up female. Included were questions regarding their feelings and experiences about being girls, what they liked or disliked about being girls, the most significant challenges and joys of “girlhood,” and where they learned what being a girl is “supposed to be.” The focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed. Each transcript was read several times by at least two members of the research team. Data were analyzed using techniques suggested by Morgan<sup>49</sup> for the analysis of focus group data.

### **FINDINGS**

Although we did not ask any specific questions about violence or harassment during the focus groups, the occurrence of

both subtle and explicit forms of violence emerged as a pervasive and powerful theme throughout all of the sessions. However, not all forms of violence were equally recognized or "named" as violence by the girls. For example, put-downs and demeaning remarks in the context of dating were often tolerated as a way to "keep" boyfriends. Similarly, consistent with reports in the literature, sexual harassment was often discounted by girls as "teasing" and "just having fun."

**"What are you supposed to do?  
Just sit there and let it happen?"**

The girls repeatedly described a multitude of ways in which their sense of self was silenced. Not only did they report many disturbing instances of harassing behaviors, but there was also a perception that there were no consequences for the perpetrators even when such behavior was reported to peers, teachers, and, in some cases, to family members. Repeatedly, there was a sense that they were the ones who "got in trouble" rather than the perpetrators. As one participant stated, "If girls do fight back against the boys we get detentions, but boys don't if they fight back." Another participant similarly told about "one guy who pinches bums. We held him by the arms so he couldn't pinch, brought him to the teacher and she sent us girls to the office." One female aptly summed it up when she asserted, "Guys can jump on our backs and grab our breasts; we told the office and we got in trouble. So we get messages from teachers that we should ignore when they do this . . . but what are you supposed to do, just sit there and let it happen?"

Occasionally the girls described their own use of assertive or aggressive measures in response to harassment, evident in the

words of one participant. "I don't care if violence is not the solution. If they grab me, I am going to pound them because they have no right to touch my body." As another stated, "I'm not going to take this crap." As these comments suggest, the message that girls receive from important adults in their lives is that they are supposed to submit to seemingly innocuous forms of sexual violence, that these acts should go unquestioned and unchallenged, and that girls should "take it and keep quiet." Such messages present very limited options for girls. If they speak out, not only are they punished, but they also learn that the perpetrators are not accountable. If they stay silent, they internalize the blame, or retaliate with aggressive measures. Either way, the act of silencing is clear, and the subsequent effect on girls is devastating.

**"No place to go"**

Safety was viewed as an important concern to many of the girls. Often, they spoke about a strong sense of danger that seemed to pervade every aspect of daily life, both within the home as well as outside of the home. This concern pertained to many facets of life and included fears about emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and assault. References to sexual harassment were typically not named as such but were revealed within the context of discussions about teasing and name-calling.

Although some girls minimized the violence in their lives, others blatantly stated that there simply are "no places to go" where they feel safe. There is "no justice," "no respect," and "it's not safe for anybody." Such strong language is not surprising in light of the disturbing comments that have been directed toward girls in the name of "teasing." "People make jokes about it, saying

'I'm going to rape you' at school. . . . It's not anything to joke about. When you've experienced that, you won't be saying that. It's not a joke," or, "If they touch me, I'm afraid they're going to carry through if I say no. And I'm scared shitless of that. . . . They don't understand how much it ruins your life." Not only are girls receiving such comments from peers, but from teachers as well. "A male teacher said, 'You have nice thighs, I wish my wife had thighs like that.'" These examples of sexual harassment should not be negated as mere teasing. The fear experienced by these girls is real and cannot be laughed away. The silencing effect of peers, parents, teachers, and authorities, combined with this fear, can result in further isolation.

In addition to voicing concerns regarding sexual harassment, these girls also told of other forms of violence that affected their lives. Whereas some girls told of street violence in their communities, even those who lived in purportedly lower-crime areas admitted fearing for their safety. One girl who lived in a neighborhood where there are gangs and frequent fighting, and where it was not unusual for girls to get mugged, told of witnessing a man being killed when she was 6 years old. Although there are still gangs in the area, she stated that she "is used to it." Thus, she has become desensitized to some of the violence but is still afraid to go out. Another participant recalled witnessing a man smash a woman's head into a brick wall in her neighborhood. In response to this incident, she and her friend phoned the police and, shortly afterward, several protective measures were instituted, including the installation of more lights on the street. Such community responses were viewed positively and were consistent with an overall sense that, for girls to be safe, they need to take steps to protect themselves.

Specifically, they cited such admonitions as, "walk on busy streets with lights," "take off watch and rings, if anything happens you don't want to lose anything important," and "walk with others."

Beyond the identification of practical, concrete measures for improving safety, several girls spoke of the need for less tangible efforts. Several suggested that education is at the root of the problem and one envisioned a world where "everything is changed," and "where people understand how others feel." Thus, although these girls had great awareness of the potential for finding themselves in dangerous situations and many practical strategies for self-protection, these did not address the fundamental issue of gender-based violence. The onus of protection was considered to be the girls' responsibility and if they failed to take safety precautions, they believed that they must assume at least part of the blame.

### **The many meanings of "family" in the lives of girls and women**

Given the varied backgrounds of the girls who participated in this research, it is not surprising that their families held diverse meanings for them. To some, the family was where they learned about equality, where confidence and self-esteem were encouraged. The possibilities for themselves in their journey from girlhood to womanhood appeared limitless. Yet these girls also described how positive messages conveyed in the home were countered time and again outside of the home, primarily by the media and from the schools. In their homes, they were "born to be free and not be possessed." At school, they described physical aggression and grabbing in the schoolyard and the classrooms and unresponsive school administrators. As one girl recalled, "One guy

looked down my friend's shirt and she pushed him away after he wouldn't leave. We got in trouble for pushing."

For other girls, the family was where they first learned of their status as "second class citizens." Rules, such as curfews, were different for them than for their brothers. In addition, boys often received preferential treatment. "I grew up with four brothers; my parents are always too busy taking my brothers to hockey or something and I'd always have to go to baseball by myself." In one extreme case, two girls spoke of how their actions were regulated by their brothers. The brothers confronted the girls about talking with other boys and even had their friends spy on the girls when they were outside the home. Both the brothers and the parents informed the girls that they were weak and, therefore, in need of protection.

From these accounts, it appears that some girls receive the message that they are incapable of protecting themselves in situations where their safety is in jeopardy. Family members (male) must step in to protect them. However, for many girls, family members within the home posed the greatest risk. Several of them spoke of physical and sexual abuse by uncles, cousins, brothers, and mothers' boyfriends. This is consistent with previous literature that states women and girls are most likely to be victimized by a known assailant. Experiences of sexual harassment and abuse both within the home and school indicate that, for many girls, there are few safe places.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the girls who participated in this research shared experiences that evoked fear and intimidation and that eroded their

sense of confidence. As others have described with respect to adult women, the girls experienced feelings of belittlement and a diminished sense of self. Efforts to understand the endemic nature of violence in their everyday lives elicited many thoughtful responses. Several suggested that the media were responsible, whereas others lay blame with the schools; some suggested that violence progresses in a somewhat linear fashion from the micro- to the macrolevels, explaining that violence begins in the home. As men learn that they have the right to control and abuse women in the home, they are entitled to similar behaviors outside of the home. Many other explanatory factors were identified, including the schools and religious institutions. Most notably absent from their understandings was an analysis of the role of gender, including male power and control, within a patriarchal society.

The girls and young women who participated in this research told of a multitude of ways in which subtle and more blatant forms of sexual harassment are experienced in their everyday lives. Through their experiences, the manner by which gender-based sexual violence becomes "normalized" is clear. The frequency with which sexual harassment occurs, the overwhelming perception that schools do little to discourage or even discuss this behavior, and the exploitation of girls by the media and society more generally combine to reinforce the prevalent "boys will be boys" attitude. The net effect is a tacit endorsement of sexual harassment. As long as there are no consequences to the perpetrators, harassing behaviors will continue unabated and publicly. In the process, girls' experiences become trivialized, their sense of confidence and safety undermined, and the institutionalization of

male domination of women is perpetuated. The message conveyed repeatedly is that sexual harassment is acceptable.

Nurses have numerous opportunities to interact with adolescent and pre-adolescent girls in many settings. In view of the endemic nature of sexual harassment in their everyday lives, it is essential that they devise strategies that challenge this harmful behavior. There are no easy solutions, yet the responsibility for ending sexual harassment should not lie exclusively in the hands of girls and women. Nurses, educators, family members, and all others who interact with this population need to share the responsibility of creating and maintaining violence-free communities. Strategies are needed that empower girls to deal with sexual harassment. Teaching and encouraging girls about the process of resistance is one strategy that may enable them to avoid the “crash” or at least minimize its effect on their lives. Ideally, the resistance needs to be taught in all realms and from an early age. However, adolescent girls are not members of our society that typically receive services. Researchers continue to receive backlash when conducting female-only studies, and government agencies rarely provide adequate resources to meet their needs. Because girls who are troubled often respond in different ways than boys—girls tend to respond by withdrawal and isolation, whereas boys become violent and aggressive—they are mistakenly assumed to be less troubled than boys and, thus, in less need for services and programs.

The notion of resistance can take many forms. Gilligan<sup>25</sup> spoke of a type of resistance that comes from a feminist perspective whereby resistance can be seen as a strength, an indication of physical and emotional health or courage. In this context,

relationships in which girls feel free to voice their full range of thoughts and feelings are considered to be healthy. Fostering such a relationship within the nursing context allows us to join in the girls’ struggles and to hear their truths about their thoughts and feelings.

Acts of healthy resistance can vary from speaking out, avoiding substance use, having healthy sexual encounters, and addressing conflict with a friend in order to stay connected, to direct challenges within a patriarchal context such as advocating against sexism or racism. The common thread is the maintenance of one’s voice and speaking one’s own truth, being part of a resonant relationship in which girls feel able to speak freely and hear their voices clearly. These types of relationships are, in themselves, acts of resistance.

Speaking the truth can have a cost. It is necessary to be *wisely resistant*. By naming the political realities and discussing these difficulties, resistance strategies can be formulated and shared. It is important to be aware of the careful balance between encouraging resistance and advocating “mouthing off.” Given the political climate and its harsh realities, it is necessary to teach a form of resistance that is responsible, respectful, and safe. It is necessary to teach young women “to feel the power of the mind, body, and spirit and yet to be conscious of where and how they speak, giving them the power to maintain voice within patriarchy.”<sup>50(p174)</sup>

In working with adolescent girls, it is important to create a context within which we can identify and “name” the subtle and overt workings of a patriarchal society. For example, when we work with girls who suffer from distorted body image, eating disorders,

or negative views about appearance, it may be advantageous to look through magazines and advertisements to help them realize that our society has idealized being thin, tall, white, and beautiful. This is a deliberate power play in which advertising companies seek to gain psychological and, subsequently, economic control over women. Men derive emotional benefit by creating the beautiful "ideal women" as well as financial benefit by instilling in women the need to attain this ideal. With the realization that the pressure to look a certain way is a societal concern, the focus shifts away from the adolescent girl and into the political arena. It is not she who is deficient or different, but our society that promotes such values.

Nurses are in an ideal position to develop health education programs with young people. In order for girls to be truly safe, we need programs that incorporate a gender-based analysis of the challenges girls face. Programs that do not examine gender as a central dimension of self-esteem cannot possibly address how girls are diminished in a society that profoundly devalues female attributes. The failure to assert that the perpetrators of violence typically are male undermines any health prevention effort on sexual violence. This omission results in girls being denied the most essential tool required to protect and empower themselves—the ability to recognize and name the everyday violence that they are expected to be able to resist and negotiate.

Without the explicit naming and defining of men's sexual violence, gendered violence remains normalized. Ultimately, if we are going to create safe environments for girls and boys and for women and men, prevention efforts must address and include boys. Maintaining a gender analysis as a

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central feature of antiviolenence educational approaches requires that we examine how male power is used against boys as well as how boys embody it. It also necessitates that we teach ways in which both girls and boys can unlearn and resist gender inequality in their own lives.

As Larkin<sup>38</sup> has observed, sexual harassment precludes the possibility that girls and young women can achieve equality in its fullest sense. By failing to acknowledge the problem, we give girls confusing and conflicting messages. On the one hand, they are told that their goals and dreams need know no bounds, that their opportunities for success are limitless. At the same time, however, they are increasingly restricted as they attempt to avoid sexual harassment. Although affirmative action and other equal opportunity initiatives have given girls and women many educational options they were once denied, the ongoing nature of sexual harassment serves to ensure that they remain unequal. Beyond the development and implementation of empowering programs that challenge the root causes of all forms of violence against girls and women, we must simultaneously, actively, and loudly join in the larger political struggle against male dominance and one of its primary weapons, sexual harassment. Only then can we begin to overcome the problem of sexual harassment—everyday violence in the lives of girls and women.

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