

What is their risk of sexual abuse and assault?

Girls and young women are at greater risk.

Females were victims in approximately 8 out of 10 sexual assaults committed against children and youth. (Statistics Canada, 2005, Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, p. 89).

Children and youth make up 61% of reported sexual assault cases. Of this, girls and young women represent 79% (Statistics Canada, 2004, Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, p. 1). Perpetrators are most commonly male and known to the victim (RESOLVE Alberta, 2002, School Based Violence Prevention Programs: A Resource Manual, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/resolve/violenceprevention/English/reviewprog/childsxintro.htm>).

Rates of stalking/criminal harassment are highest for young women, which is consistent with patterns of other kinds of violence against women; 58% of stalking survivors are under 34 years old (Statistics Canada, 2004, Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile, p. 9, 15).

12% of young women 18 to 24 reported at least one incident of violence by an intimate partner in a year period, compared with the national average of 3% of all married or cohabiting women (Johnson, 1996, Dangerous Domains: Violence Against Women in Canada, p. 148). Furthermore, “women under 25 are also at greatest risk of being killed by their male partners” (Morris, Marika, CRIAW Factsheet: Violence Against Women and Girls, http://www.criaw-icref.ca/factSheets/Violence_fact_sheet_e.htm, March 2002).

Are some young women at even greater risk?

Violence crosses all boundaries, but young women and girls from marginalized communities (e.g. those marginalized by ethno-racial, income level, gender, sexuality, and ability identities) are more vulnerable.

80% of Aboriginal girls under the age of 8 in the Northwest Territories have been sexually assaulted (Gurr, Mailloux, Kinnon, and Doerage, 1999, Breaking the Links Between Poverty and Violence Against Women: A Resource Guide).

The rate of sexual abuse for girls living with disabilities is four times that of the national average (Razack, 1994, “From Consent to Responsibility, from Pity to Respect: Subtexts in Cases of Sexual Violence involving Girls and Women with Developmental Disabilities”, Social Inquiry 19, 4: 891-922).

Young women and girls from marginalized communities also have difficulties accessing culturally and linguistically appropriate services. Too often, violence and isolation that newcomer young women, young women of colour, and Aboriginal young women face is stereotyped as a “cultural” or “religious” issue particular to certain ethno-racial communities, rather than a result of structural inequalities (Razack, 1998, cited in National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2002, In the Best

Interests of the Girl Child, http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfvcnivf/familyviolence/pdfs/Girl_Child_E.pdf, p. 52).

Why are the risks greater for young women?

All women of all ages share experiences of violence, but young women and girls are at greater risk of violence because in this society, they have fewer rights and they get less respect. Gender violence is about power imbalances between women and men and stem from the fact that women have less power than men (e.g. economic, social, religious, and governmental power). Power imbalances are more extreme for girls and young women and even more so for girls and young women who experience multiple discriminations based on their identities (e.g. race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and immigration status).

Are girls getting more violent?

There is a lot of talk in the media about how “girls are getting more violent” and how girls are behaving more like “boys”. It is based on an assumption that rates of violence perpetrated by girls and young women are increasing. However, young women commit only 3.83% of violent crimes and that number hasn’t gone up significantly from the past. What has changed is media coverage of crimes involving young women, which creates a perception that young women are committing more violent crimes. Additionally, as a result of “zero tolerance” policies and media misrepresentation, behaviours that were not criminalized in the past are now under scrutiny of authorities and the legal system. In other words, “increases” violence can be due to a change in charging behaviour within the legal system and institutions like schools, as opposed to changes in the actual behaviour of girls and young women (Elizabeth Fry Society, Labelling Young Women as Violent: Vilification of the Most Vulnerable, <http://www.elizabethfry.ca/vilifica/contents.htm>).

How to help a young woman facing abuse?

First, let her know that you believe her. Often, girls and young women are reluctant to disclose abuse because they are afraid that people will think they are lying. Letting her know that you believe what she is telling you is an important step in helping the woman access assistance.

Second, tell her that she is not alone and that many women have survived violence. Fifty-one percent of women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of sexual or physical violence (Statistics Canada, 1993, “The Violence Against Women Survey”, The Daily, 18 November).

Third, you can help her access some of the community services in her community. There are places she can go and numbers she can call. Fourth, let her know that you will keep what she has told you confidential. Don’t pressure her to tell anyone or report to the police but let her know that if she does, you will support her.

Finally, it is important to support all efforts to change conditions in our society that condone violence against girls and women. You can donate your time, resources, or money to a local women’s organization that provides services and advocacy for women, you can lobby your local politicians for change, and you can refuse to tolerate violence whenever and wherever you witness it.

Where can young women call for help?

Assaulted Women's Helpline: 416-863-0511/ Toll-free 1-866-863-0511/ 416-863-7868 (TTY)

Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/ Multicultural Women Against Rape: 416-597-8808/ 416-597-1214 (TTY)

Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868

For more helplines and community services, call 211 or visit www.211toronto.ca