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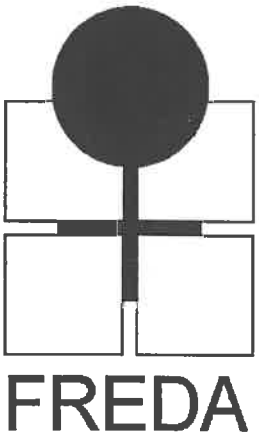

VIOLENCE AGAINST MARGINALIZED GIRLS: A REVIEW OF THE CURRENT LITERATURE

by

Yasmin Jiwani, Ph.D.

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Yasmin Jiwani, Ph.D.[1]

When we label this social situation as one of the vulnerability of "special needs groups," we take the focus away from those who actively and aggressively set out to sexually violate and again we fail to ask about the sources of the violence itself.

Sherene Razack (1994:900)

INTRODUCTION

The category of "marginalized" girls is problematic in terms of potentially and conceptually collapsing distinctions which are materially rooted in social reality. As it is used here, the term is meant to embrace the differential degrees of "otherness" and exclusion, the outcomes of which vary according to the specificity of the location, social construction and identification of the groups being referred to. For the purposes of this review, marginalized girls refers to girls with Aboriginal ancestry, disabilities, lesbian or bisexual orientation, racialized backgrounds, and girls from working-class backgrounds. Each of these groups is constructed differently and shares the experience of exclusion, both historically and contemporarily. Yet for each, and within each group, the experiences of gender, race, class, sexual orientation and disability reflect interlocking oppressions which render them highly specific. Hence, not only are the oppressions experienced differently, but no one category is monolithic. Thus, for lesbians of colour, the experiences of race, gender, and sexual orientation interlock in complex ways thereby leading to an articulation of experience that is both highly specific and that shares commonalities with both lesbians and girls of colour. Similarly, the situation of Aboriginal women and girls in Canada reflects the interlocking oppressions of race, class and gender.

To outline the different experiences of exclusion and marginalization is thus problematic as such analysis would tend to simplify and dilute the complexities that inhere in the experiences of girls from these backgrounds. It is also rendered problematic by the reality that many of these communities are targeted and marginalized precisely because they don't fit into normative categories and frameworks, thereby rendering their difference as **deviant**

[1] I would like to acknowledge Benita Bunjun for her untiring efforts in locating and helping to analyze the literature dealing with marginalized girls.

and legitimizing exclusionary policies and practices (Griffin, 1996; Jiwani, 1992, 1997; Razack, 1994b). The following cursory review, therefore, attempts to highlight particular factors that contribute to and perpetuate the marginalization of Aboriginal girls, girls with disabilities, lesbians, and racialized girls. Class factors cut across all these groups, although working class girls' experiences are mediated by economic marginality and exclusion specifically. Complicating this analysis is the paucity of literature that is distinctly Canadian and that focuses primarily on girls. In keeping with Razack's cautionary note (cited above), this review will attempt to highlight the socio-structural factors that underpin and contribute to marginality, thereby rendering these girls more vulnerable to violence.

At the core of the diversity of experiences that shape the lives and realities of girls from marginalized groups is the intensity of rejection and exclusion mediated by mainstream society. This rejection assumes the form of homophobia, racism, class discrimination, and ableism interlocked with sexism in various combinations and permutations. The historicity and entrenched discourses of exclusion and rejection also amplify these experiences and are mediated through economics, education, popular culture, mass media, family, religion, laws, and polity. The obverse side of this rejection is the overwhelming pressure to conform and assimilate into the dominant normative framework, the internalization of which leads to an inferiorization, negation, and hatred of the self. This overview does not focus on marginalized girls who have been able to negotiate a viable existence for themselves, but rather, the intention is to highlight factors that render them more vulnerable, in socio-structural terms, to violence.

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although an attempt was made to canvass Canadian literature on girls from marginalized groups, searches of various databases did not yield significant information.[2] Rather, it seems as though the concerns and lived realities of girls have only recently gained attention in North America (e.g., Artz, 1998; Banister, 1997, Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1990; Tipper, 1997; Tolman, 1994). Many of the existing studies tend either to concentrate on adolescents and children as an overall category (e.g., Miller, 1995; Pharris, et al., 1997; Ratner, 1996; Robinson and Ward, 1995; Rosenthal, et al., 1996), or subsume girls within the category of young women (given that the legal age of adulthood, i.e., shift from girlhood to womanhood, is 18/19 years in Canada). Further, studies that do focus on marginalized girls, tend to frame their inquiry in terms of delinquency.

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[2] The databases searched included Sociofile, Psych. Abstracts, Criminology Abstracts, Medline, and general library searches. Because of time constraints, the collection of materials was limited to their availability at one of Vancouver's two universities.

Recent Canadian studies that have focused on girls in general include the national survey of girls conducted under the auspices of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW) (Holmes and Silverman, 1992)[3] and the national consultations conducted with adolescent girls by the Canadian Teachers Federation which culminated in the *A Cappella* report. Results of the CACSW survey revealed details about how girls perceive themselves, their concerns, and their realities. However, the responses were not segregated according to race, sexual orientation, class, or abilities and hence do not provide insight into the lived realities and concerns of marginalized girls. Rather, the authors suggest that self-esteem levels may vary between groups, noting that Black girls in the United States have higher self-esteem levels than their white counterparts (Holmes and Silverman, 1992:15). This comparison problematizes the absence of a contextual analysis since in the US, Black experiences of racism are acknowledged in the political, legal and academic discourses, whereas in Canada, the tendency to deny or mask racism is more prevalent (Bannerji, 1993, 1987; Billingsley and Muszynski, 1985; Brand, 1994), and hence has different ramifications for identity formation for racialized girls. The survey results also revealed that over a quarter of the students surveyed acknowledged the existence of discrimination in their schools, however, as the researchers point out, a similar number were uncertain.

In a more recent study of the health and well-being determinants of Canadian girls, Jennifer Tipper notes that, "Missing from this picture are the faces of young lesbian women, young women with disabilities, young women of colour, young women who are happy and high achieving, young women who are homeless and living in poverty, and young women who are meeting the everyday challenges of growing up a girl in a predominantly patriarchal society" (1997:39). Part of the absence of marginalized girls in the literature may lie in the fact that they are considered inaccessible by researchers. This may in turn have to do with the close-knit nature of many marginalized communities – a response to the racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia and discrimination they encounter. Additionally, the lack of published research may have to do with the fact that many studies on marginalized groups are often framed as community-based needs assessment studies and thus not included within the gambit of academic research; and a situation compounded by the lack of representation of these voices within the academy itself which then contributes to a lack of interest or research on marginalized groups. Nevertheless, an examination of the select national and international literature that could be garnered, reveals certain trends with regard to studies dealing with marginalized girls. It should be noted that the following overview is by **no means** exhaustive. Instead, the aim here is to simply highlight salient issues.

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[3] The survey was sent to schools across Canada and was completed by 3207 students, of which 1603 were girls spread through grades 8, 9 and 10 (Holmes and Silverman, 1992: 5).

ABORIGINAL GIRLS AND WOMEN

Studies of Aboriginal and indigenous youth (in Australia, Canada and the US) focus on acculturative stress, high suicidality, sexual abuse and domestic violence, delinquent behaviour, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, the impact of transnational adoptions, and child apprehensions (e.g., Caputo, et al., 1994; Kenny, et al., 1997; Pharris, et al., 1997; MacDonald, 1985; McGillivray, 1985; Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1995; Zylberberg, 1991). While many of these studies do not focus on girls or young women *per se*, they do point out the intergenerational impact of violence, beginning with colonization, residential schools, cultural annihilation, and ghettoization (McIvor and Nahanee, 1998).

In its special report on suicide in Aboriginal communities, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People notes that "Teenaged boys commit suicide 6 times more often than girls; but girls are hospitalized for attempting suicide at twice the rate of boys" (1995:11). Further, Aboriginal youth suicide rates are 5 to 6 times higher than for their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Moreover, the incidence of child sexual abuse in some native communities has been recorded as being as high as 75 to 80 percent for girls under 8 years of age (McEvoy and Daniluk, 1995), although McIvor and Nahanee cite a Corrections Canada study which puts the figure at 75 percent under 18, 50 percent under 14, and 25 percent under 7 years of age (1998:65). The Commission identified the economically depressed conditions of life on the reserves, lack of employment and alternatives, the legacy of violence as a result of colonialism, and the uprooting and destruction of traditional beliefs, as contributing factors. In his analysis of child welfare policies, MacDonald (1985) underscores the impact of child apprehension and adoption policies that place Aboriginal children into non-native families and the severe racism and dislocation they experience as a result of this. The assimilationist mechanisms used by the Canadian state to erase Aboriginal cultures and identities has been well documented elsewhere (Kline, 1994; Palmer and Cooke, 1996).

While the literature focusing on Aboriginal girls is scarce, it can be surmised that their experiences are shaped by the interlocking effects of racism and sexism (Frank, 1992; Maracle, 1996; Razack, 1994b; Shaw, et al., 1991), and mirror those of Aboriginal women.[4] The Ontario Native Women's study on violence against women in Aboriginal communities reported that eight out of every ten women and four out of every ten children are abused and assaulted (Lynn and O'Neill, 1995). Other studies note that many Aboriginal girls leave their reserves and end up working on the streets in urban areas (Caputo, et al., 1994; Currie, et al., 1995; Ratner, 1996). Here, their structural location as street-involved young women makes them more vulnerable to violence from johns, police,

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[4] McIvor and Nahanee argue that compartmentalizing "types" of violence within Aboriginal communities into distinct categories of investigation is counter-productive. "Sexual, physical, and emotional attacks are inter-related and inter-generational in our communities," they argue (1998: 63).

and drug dealers (Davis, 1994; Shaw, et al., 1991).[5] At the same time, their location on the margins of society also makes them invisible insofar as having their needs addressed and their voices heard (Maracle, 1996; McIvor and Nahanee, 1998). Stereotypes communicated through the media, combined with the exclusionary and racist treatment meted out by many dominant institutions, contribute to the further marginalization of Aboriginal girls and women (Harris, 1991; Kline, 1994; McGillivray, 1985; Singer, 1982). The lack of culturally sensitive programming exacerbates the marginalization (Schwager, et al., 1991).

RACIALIZED GIRLS

Many of the themes identified as impacting on aboriginal girls also shape the lives of other racialized girls. Primary among these are the intersecting effects of racism, sexism, and in some cases, ableism and "compulsory heterosexuality" (Lynn and O'Neill, 1995; Rich, 1983 as cited in Tolman, 1994). However, aside from a few studies (e.g., Vertinsky, et al., 1996), none has documented the impact of racism and other forms of exclusion experienced by girls or young women. Nor have Canadian studies documented the incidence of date rape, child sexual abuse, or other forms of violence experienced by racialized girls. In part, this lack of attention may be due to the inability of researchers to gain a foothold in many of these communities which tend to be withdrawn from outside scrutiny as a result of the racism they have encountered.[6]

American studies, in contrast, have explored the incidence of violence experienced by women of colour, as well as girls from different cultural backgrounds. In a comparative examination of the psychological functioning of Black and Latino girls who had experienced sexual abuse, Sanders-Phillips, et al., (1995) found that the context of abuse was very different for each group, with Latino girls being abused at a younger age, more often by family members, and also witnessing higher levels of family violence. Their findings are supported by Perilla, et al., (1994) in a study concerning the "ecology of abused Latinas" in terms of the cultural scripts to which they are exposed and the economic pressures they experience.

Social location, cultural scripts and accessibility to resources also mediate the experience and kinds of abuse that girls and women from different groups experience (Dasgupta and Warrier, 1996; Dosanjh, 1994; Huisman, 1996; Rhee, 1997). Kenny, et al., (1997), found

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[5] In their study of federally sentenced women, Shaw, et al., (1991) found that 23 percent were aboriginal and of these 91 percent had experienced physical abuse, and 61 percent were sexually abused. Further, many were adopted, or placed into non-native foster homes where they experienced intense racism from the dominant society.

[6] Tipper (1997) notes that she could not gain access to girls from diverse ethno-cultural groups as she had no prior entry into these groups. Part of the problem may lie in the fear that many racialized communities have about ethno-specific data which might be used against them, and the fear of women within those groups of betraying community/racial solidarity (Lucashenko, 1996; Razack, 1994b).

that in their sample of non-Hispanic Anglo, Mexican American, African American, and American Indian women between the ages of 18 and 22, the non-Hispanic Anglos reported the highest levels of rape, while the other groups reported experiences of "coercive sexual abuse." And a comparative examination of White and African American women's experiences of sexual harassment and prior sexual trauma showed that African American women significantly under-reported the harassment and suffered greater negative impact from child sexual abuse than did their white counterparts (Wyatt and Riederle, 1994). The researchers contend that part of the reason underlying African American women's reluctance to report sexual harassment lies in their historic devaluation and objectification, a finding which lends further support to the work of Black feminists and historians (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1982; Williams, 1991).

In a study involving 243 women of colour from four different groups (White, African American, Latina, and Asian American) recruited from two colleges, Urquiza, et al., (1994), found that of the women who had reported rape as adults, two-thirds had experienced child sexual abuse. The group with the lowest rates of prior sexual abuse and rape were Asian American women, whereas both the African American and White women experienced similar levels of child sexual abuse, but the African American women reported higher rates of rapes. Urquiza, et al., (1994) stress the need for a broader contextual analysis. These variations underline the differences found among and within groups of women of colour. For instance, a study of delinquent girls from three racialized groups (African American, Hispanic and White) found that the predictors of theft and vandalism were different for each group (Taylor, et al., 1997). Similarly, in the area of eating disorders, Robinson, et al., (1996), found that Hispanic and Asian girls were at risk primarily because their body dissatisfaction levels were in some cases higher than those of White girls, yet these girls' views have tended not to be examined. In their study of sexual abuse among Asian Americans, Chen and True (1994), found that although the rates were lower than the national average, a significant number were unreported. The lack of reporting is most likely due to the community's reluctance to recognize this abuse internally, as well as its potential to ruin their external reputation as a model minority.

Cultural Identity and Conflict

Rather than focusing on girls' experiences of racism and sexism, many studies have tended to concentrate on issues of cultural and intergenerational conflict within racialized immigrant communities. To some extent, these studies have emerged in response to prevailing occupations in the area of ethnicity and identity retention cohering around the debate of whether such identity is primordially rooted (Geertz, 1963; Isaacs, 1975) or situationally constructed (Keyes, 1981; Lyman and Douglass, 1973). Further, the prevalence of these identity-oriented studies suggests a greater degree of comfort in looking at "cultural" issues of co-existence, conflict, and exchange, or assimilation and acculturation (Drury, 1991; Jabbra, 1983; Kim, 1980), although more recently, this trend has shifted (e.g., Matthews, 1997).

However, despite the use of culture as the focal point of inquiry, many of these studies reveal that girls within racialized immigrant cultures experience a greater degree of dissatisfaction and strain with the normative values imposed by their own culture (Hutnik, 1986; Miller, 1995; Onder, 1996; Rosenthal, et al., 1996). The contextual factors influencing and shaping this dissatisfaction are not examined in structural terms, i.e., as emanating from the subordinate position of the cultural group in relation to the dominant society, and the construction of racialized immigrant communities as deviant Others (Thobani, 1992). Nor has the complex interaction of sexism and racism shaping the lives and choices of young women been examined in great detail (Vertinsky, et al., 1996). Thus, rather than focusing on how racialized girls are inferiorized and how they internalize dominant values which embody a rejection of the self and their cultural communities, existing studies tend to frame these "Other" communities as being problematic insofar as clinging to traditional, non-liberatory and patriarchal cultures. A poignant example of this framing can be found in the debates surrounding female genital mutilation. However, a significant departure from this trend can be found in recent American research which focuses on the development of a racialized identity among girls who are biracial (Twine, 1996).

Social (Dis)Location

Current research indicates that refugee and immigrant children may also exhibit signs of post-traumatic stress in response to the violence they have encountered directly or indirectly (Almqvist and Brandell-Forsberg, 1997; Cohn, et al., 1981; Takezawa, 1991). Specific studies which focus on immigrant and refugee girls in Canada are lacking. However, in her study examining the effects of internment and redress among third-generation Japanese-Americans, Takezawa points to the intense shame and humiliation experienced by the children of those who were interned. She notes how the movement toward redress helped restore a sense of identity.

LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL GIRLS

Much of the literature on the violence directed against lesbian and bisexual girls is United States based. Canadian studies have tended to focus on lesbian adults and lesbian battering (Faulkner, 1998; Ristock, 1991, 1994; Weissman and Fernie, 1992). For instance, Chesley, et al., (1992) (cited in Ristock, 1991), found that 20 percent of the Toronto-based lesbians they surveyed had experienced some form of violence in their relationships. Ristock maintains that lesbian violence is grounded in the internalization of patriarchal and homophobic values and attitudes that abound in dominant society and inhere in its institutions. This is apparent in the sheer level of violence directed at lesbian, bisexual and gay youth by members of the dominant, heterosexual society (Hunter, 1990; Savin-Williams, 1994).

American studies have shown that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are the targets of intense violence stemming from homophobia (Chasin, 1997; Savin-Williams, 1994). In his survey of the literature, Savin-Williams discusses the high rates of suicide and attempted

suicide, substance abuse, school problems, and problems with the law among gay, bisexual, cross-gendered and lesbian youth, which are a direct result of the violence and hostility they have encountered. Many are runaways (and "throwaways," i.e., teens who have been thrown out of their homes by parents because of their sexual orientation), as a result of violence in their homes. This is not to imply that all gays, lesbians and bisexuals lead problematic lives, but rather that the chronic harassment and violence they experience is intense and can result in tragic outcomes. Drawing on existing literature, Savin-Williams notes that, "suicide is the leading cause of death among lesbian, gay males, and bisexual youths, primarily because of the debilitating effects of growing up in a homophobic society" (1994:266). The suicide rate of gay and lesbian youth is two to three times that of heterosexual adolescents. For many lesbians and gays, the social isolation they experience as a result of their difference is the most difficult to deal with (Martin & Hetrick, 1988, cited in Savin-Williams, 1994). Often, this results in hiding their sexuality for fear of physical and verbal abuse. The situation is heightened in the context of schools, universities and colleges where organized hate groups are often openly recruiting students (Harris, 1997; Kinsella, 1994; Prutzman, 1994; Sidel, 1995).

For Aboriginal lesbians, lesbians of colour, and lesbians with disabilities or from working class backgrounds, the situation is compounded by the intersecting influences of racism, sexism, classism, ableism and homophobia. Not only do they face the task of creating a viable lesbian identity in the absence of any societal support (Griffin, 1996; Nava, 1992; Tolman, 1994), but they are also forced into a situation of choosing between identification with their racial/ethnic group or other reference group, and their sexuality (Savin-Williams, 1994).

GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES

As with lesbian girls, the concerns and experiences of violence among girls with disabilities are similarly understated in the existing literature on marginalized populations. However, current studies on women with disabilities point to a higher vulnerability to violence (Lynn and O'Neill, 1995; Razack, 1994). Much depends also on the visibility/invisibility of the disability (Dale Stone, 1993). Mandell found that "53% of women who have been disabled from birth have been raped, abused, or assaulted" (Lynn and O'Neill, 1995:278). They are mostly abused by family members and caretakers. However, these figures do not represent the true extent of violence as it is experienced by women with disabilities. Razack (1994) cites figures that show these rates as being four times that of the national average. Many cases are unreported for fear the women will not be believed because of the discriminatory attitudes of the police, courts, and agencies mandated to deal with violence (Ticoll and Panitch, 1993).

Ticoll and Panitch (1993) identify a number of factors that heighten the vulnerability to violence of girls and women with disabilities. These include their segregation from others through living conditions, education, and employment; lack of decision making power, and often forced dependency on others; low self-esteem as a result of stigma attached to the disability and dependency on others; lack of access to services; and poverty (1993:85).

Women and girls with disabilities are often treated in a paternalistic way and constructed within legal discourse, to elicit pity rather than respect (Razack, 1994). Underpinning this attitude is the ableist preference for perfect bodies, productivity, efficiency and the like. In contrast, the disabled body is treated and constructed as the "negative" body (Wendell, 1989). Girls with disabilities from different ethnic backgrounds are often expected to privilege their connections to their own ethnic group, or class (Fine, 1992).

In their study involving 1,249 children with and without disabilities in the United States, Sobsey, et al., (1997) found that girls were more likely to be sexually abused, while boys experienced more physical abuse and neglect. In their regional study of sexual abuse among young people with disabilities in British Columbia, the McCreary Centre found that "just over half (54%) of the service providers have encountered, in the past year, children or adolescents with disabilities who allegedly have been abused" (1993:5). The Centre does not provide gender segregated data which would enable a comparison of sexual abuse of girls and boys.

CONCLUSION

While this overview provides a modicum of information on the kinds of violence and, in some cases, the rates of violence that are experienced by differently marginalized groups, it does not provide the whole picture. For one, class issues cut across all marginalized groups, and the experiences of violence encountered by working-class girls has not been adequately addressed in this overview. Poverty and homelessness not only contribute directly to vulnerability to violence, but also facilitate the sexual exploitation of girls and young women (O'Reilly-Fleming, 1992; Webber, 1991; Welsh, et al., 1995).

However, this overview points to certain commonalities that structure and impact upon the lives of marginalized girls. Principal among these is the impact of interlocking oppressions such as racism, ableism, homophobia, and classism, with sexism. It appears that the impact of multiple forms of oppression contributes to the increased vulnerability of marginalized girls to violence. More than that, it is clear that these forms of oppression are constitutive of violence itself as they undermine the development of a positive sense of self and social identity, and restrict access to the resources and privileges of mainstream society. Hence, it can be argued that the definition of violence has to be broadened to include within it, racism, homophobia, ableism, and classism. Many of these forms of violence are embodied in hate crimes, and directed against those who do not "fit."

It is evident that there is a lacuna of Canadian literature that addresses the commonalities and differences between marginalized girls. Suggestions for future research include ethnographic studies on how marginalized girls negotiate their realities and mobilize against different forms of violence. Some of this research is in process, but much more needs to be done in order to develop a suitable base of Canadian research. Further, while a national study focusing on incidents of violence against gays and lesbians is currently

underway, research focusing on lesbian girls and teens is still required.[7] Similarly, it is obvious that more Canadian research needs to be undertaken that focuses on girls with disabilities and Aboriginal girls. Undoubtedly, a fair amount of community-based research has already been undertaken. However, its limited distribution and fragmentation is disturbing as it suggests a knowledge-base that is inaccessible and therefore cannot be used to influence policies and practices beyond the local level. Most critically, it is clear that research on violence against women and girls has to factor in the experiences of marginalized girls. To have studies that make no mention of racial diversity, class background, sexual orientation, or disability, is to further render these groups invisible.

[7] The legal obstacles to undertaking such research are numerous and derive from laws which penalize homosexual activity among "minors."

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