

where we're at:

school safety

for young women



Spring 2008 Bi-annual Newsletter



**Metropolitan Action Committee on
Violence Against Women and Children**

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About METRAC

Since 1984, the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) has pursued its mandate to build the capacity of individuals, communities, and institutions to prevent and respond effectively to the issue of violence towards diverse women and children. Our mission has been undertaken through public education and training, safety initiatives, partnerships, research, and policy in three program areas: Community Outreach and Education, Community Safety, and Community Justice.

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Andrea Gunraj, Outreach Director
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Message from the Executive Director

Wendy Komiotis (Executive Director)

Welcome to METRAC's Spring 2008 Newsletter. In this issue we spotlight the theme of Safety in Schools, including the perspectives of youth, an interview with a teacher of the Toronto District School Board, and an interview with a member of the School Community Safety Advisory Panel. As usual, we provide brief updates on METRAC's programs and we invite our readers and to join us in the work to end violence towards women and girls.

The issue of gender-based violence in schools has been of long concern to METRAC. Readers may recall that in our last newsletter, we shared brief highlights from our deputation to the School Community Safety Advisory Panel, entitled "Safety Strategies Must Address Sexual Violence". We also informed readers that the current emphasis on bullying and gender-neutral approaches addressing "youth violence" has fallen short by ignoring the specific nature of violence directed at young women and girls, leading to



Performers at the Get Up, Stand Up celebration, held at the Toronto Women's Bookstore (December 2007)

ineffective solutions and the systemic devaluing of girls' experiences.

Following the release of the Safety Panel's Report in January 2008, the issue of sexual violence towards young women and girls in schools has raised its

presence like a persistent cold. The Panel uncovered violence against girls and young women as a pervasive problem in schools. It also found policies on sexual violence to be deficient and that current measures to report sexual assaults do not work. The Panel concluded that while all female students are at risk of gender-based violence, factors of race, gender, sexual identity, disability, class, and immigration status may play a role in producing vulnerabilities to this form of violence.

These findings, together with the set of comprehensive recommendations contained in the report, present a compelling opportunity to end the denial and silence on sexual violence in schools and in society as a whole, and make it a priority. We commend the Panel for speaking broadly and inclusively to the systemic and institutional changes that are required to truly advance the safety of all members of the school community. We trust that the recommendations in this report will not languish on a shelf gathering dust.

One aspect of the report which has been understated and deserves mention is the issue of parental

engagement in violence prevention activities. My intention is not to scapegoat or blame parents for the violence in our schools, nor to diminish the critical role of legislative, institutional, and systemic reform to create safer schools for all. Rather, we must raise expectations for all members of the school community, and this includes parents. We live at a time when violence is the norm in our society. These days, parenting is a huge challenge and parents need help to raise non-violent children. Resources must be made available for parent-training programs that will provide the necessary supports for parents to raise healthy children who will give and expect respect for themselves and others.

To conclude, I would like to introduce Zahra Dhanani as METRAC's new Legal Director. She has worked in the violence against women sector for 17 years and is an accomplished lawyer, community worker, and cultural activist. In fact, she has been honoured for her excellent achievements by receiving the 2008 YWCA Woman of Distinction Award for Social Change. METRAC extends our welcome and congratulations to Zahra!

Young Women & School Safety

Andrea Gunraj (Outreach Director)

For many years now, METRAC has highlighted the fact that violence against young women is a problem that must be addressed and prevented in its own right. Statistics demonstrate that young women are at greatest risk of gender-based violence, including stalking, sexual assault, and murder (Statistics Canada, 2006). Evidence indicates that marginalized girls and young women are particularly vulnerable, including those who experience racism, classism, heterosexism, and/or ableism. For example, young women living with disabilities experience violence at a rate of four times the national average (S. Razack, Law and Social Inquiry, 1994).

The recent *Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety* indicates that violence against young women is a “pervasive problem in [Toronto District School Board] schools” (School Community Safety Advisory Panel, 2008). In fact, during the panel's investigation, 7% of females responding to a survey said they had been

assaulted in the past 2 years. 21% said they knew of at least one student who was sexually assaulted at school in the past 2 years, and the vast majority said they wouldn't report experiencing victimization to school officials or police. These responses provide a snapshot of the broader reality - young women face gender-based violence at school, while being equally at risk of experiencing it in their homes, communities, and neighbourhoods, and they often suffer in silence.

Young women face gendered violence at school and they often suffer in silence

The Road to Health report makes many recommendations to build safety in schools, some of which address gendered violence. These include the creation of more gender-based peer education programs, stronger connections with community

groups, training and support for teachers, and policies and practices to address the realities of why young women are afraid to report violence they experience.

In *Safe Schools: Every Girl's Right*, Amnesty International (2008) reports that girls around the world face “teasing, bullying, sexually explicit jokes and gestures, excessive punishment, and even unwanted sexual activities” in school contexts, which serve as barriers to their education. The findings of the Road to Health report demonstrates that Canada is by no means above this global problem. Many of the Amnesty report

Update: CCI Partnership

Canadian Crossroads International (CCI) is facilitating a 4-year partnership between METRAC and WiLDAF-Ghana (Women in Law and Development in Africa). This March, our Executive Director visited WiLDAF in Ghana, where time was spent visioning, planning, and exploring various models for our exciting partnership.

recommendations are familiar - they stress the need for appropriate processes to make it safer for girls to report violence and the need to implement meaningful community supports for young women.

During our history of working with educators, youth service providers, and youth, METRAC has also learned much about school safety, particularly through participant evaluations and consultations conducted by our Respect in Action (ReAct) program. For example, both educators and youth workers have expressed that they don't know enough about gender-based violence. They're especially uncertain about how to address sexual violence and harassment and even less sure of how to challenge societal stereotypes, including rape myths, the tendency to blame the victim, homophobic ideas, and the “slut status”. Finally, educators and youth workers have indicated that they need more support and education to better address issues faced by diverse racialized, immigrant, and refugee communities with respect to gender-based violence.

Changing Mindsets: Linda Kalafatides

Patricia Kenny (Interviewer - METRAC Volunteer)

The Panel's findings related to gender-based violence were shocking to many. Linda Kalafatides, a grade 11 Gender Studies teacher at L'Amoreaux Collegiate, noted that her school community, from students to administrators, wanted to know more. Specifically, they wanted to know what was happening in their school and to their students. The physical design of L'Amoreaux C.I. does not allow for a common staff room where teachers can gather and discuss issues informally. As a result, Ms. Kalafatides questions whether fellow teachers are fully aware of all the “little violences” that occur. When asked for an example, she cited an activity in which some male students have engaged - shouting out ratings of sexual attractiveness of female peers as they walk down the halls.

Given Ms. Kalafatides's profession, it isn't surprising that her ideas about stemming gendered violence in schools involve education. “We need to get to the root of the problem”, she says. “The task of combating this is huge.” That task, in her opinion, must focus on changing mindsets. All societies have standards

regarding how its members should treat each other. Though those standards may have expanded to include marginalized groups in our society to some degree, it is evident that there is much room for improvement when we look at the information and entertainment presented by the media.

“We need to get to the root of the problem. The task of combating this is huge”

Media literacy is developed in Ms. Kalafatides's class. Together, she and her students examine hot-button issues and analyze why they are controversial. This teaches students to look behind the stories and learn about the root causes of some of society's most disturbing problems. Ms. Kalafatides says that her students were aware of the Road to Health report due to media coverage. In her class, they worked backward from the Report's findings to examine what questions must have been asked to arrive at the reported data. This allowed them to explore areas relating to study

design and data interpretation and engaged them in a more active reading of the a report. The class also recently watched “Killer’s Paradise”, a documentary about the murder of over two thousand women in Guatemala to which little attention has been paid by law enforcement officials. The students collected information about police procedures and gender stereotypes, and also constructed their own concrete action plans. This helped the students feel that change is possible because, laments Ms. Kalafatides, “It can get depressing.”

Few would argue against education being a key component in eliminating violence in schools. The

Update: Justice Projects

Our Access to Justice projects, funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario, are in final stages. They focus on Aboriginal women, women experiencing workplace violence and harassment, and criminalized/imprisoned women. Materials on the law’s impact on these women will be created and posted on the OWJN website (www.owjn.org).

enthusiastic efforts of teachers like Linda Kalafatides show what one educator can do to change the mindsets that support gender-based violence in our schools and, ultimately, our society at large.

Youth Voices on School Safety

Andrea Gunraj (Outreach Director) and Dawn Wildman (METRAC Volunteer)



WiLDAF-METRAC partnership members, in Ghana

We conducted an anonymous safety survey with 5 young women from a Toronto high school. In response to a question about their opinion on whether or not schools are safe for young women, they all expressed that it has a lot to do with the student and the particular school environment. One said, “it really all depends on the girl, the school, the atmosphere.” Another expressed that “it’s generally safe, but not completely though because there are some things that sometimes happen that shouldn’t.”

Our survey respondents had many thoughts as to why young women might not report experiencing abuse. One felt that students are afraid of retaliation from abusers or being called a “snitch” if they tell someone. Others suggested that shock, fear of more unwanted attention, and embarrassment could all play into a student’s decision not to report. As one respondent

said, “they accept the fact that it happened and you can’t turn back time so they kinda just brush it off.” Four out of the five survey participants expressed that they knew of a young woman who was abused or harassed at school. One respondent said that the student she knew did report the incident, but another said the people she knew “didn’t tell anyone because they didn’t want to make a big deal about it” and they “didn’t want the person(s) to bother them again.”

Our survey respondents had many ideas of how they could help a friend in a violent situation. “I would ask her what she wanted to happen,” one wrote. Two said that they’d try to confront the abuser, and three respondents expressed that they would talk to their friend about seeking help from authorities.

Answering a final question about what could be done to make schools safer, three survey participants felt that security measures such as cameras, hall monitors, and emergency buttons could make a difference. One young woman felt that there isn’t a way to stop harassment because “you can’t change the way someone thinks or what they want to do”, but she thought that more serious consequences could help. Another said that school administration, teachers, and students “need to get more involved” because “sometimes people don’t know how to handle it on their own and need help.” *METRAC would like to thank our youth survey respondents for their important insights.*

Dania Majid: Safety School Panel Member

Melissa Clark (Interviewer - METRAC Volunteer) and Dania Majid (Interviewee - Research and Drafting Support, School Community Safety Advisory Panel)

The Road to Health report that I was a part of creating recognizes that schools are both learning environments and social atmospheres that shape youth. Some schools have responded by implementing initiatives for students to engage in issues of equity. The Toronto District School Board piloted an anonymous hotline for students to report violence, given the fact that reporting rates are low. The media noted that younger students than expected have been placing calls. There's a lot to be said for what's going on at the elementary level, and the hotline experience demonstrates that we should focus on violence prevention at younger ages.

After the tragic murder of Jordan Manners at C.W. Jeffreys Collegiate Institute, new administration came in. A recent Toronto Star article stated that the new principal created a principal/student committee to give the student body a stronger voice. So far, this has appeared to have built a better connection between administration and students and has increased the level of community involvement in the school, mutual respect, and trust.

One reason that youth are apprehensive to report sexual violence is that they don't trust or understand the justice system. At the same moment that reporting is encouraged, it's also important to gage the particular circumstance at hand and ensure adequate supports are provided. The perpetrator may need counselling to understand the severity of what they did. The victim and their family may need support to deal with trauma. School policies on sexual assault need to be much clearer and staff really need to be better trained on how to address sexual assault.

We also need to look at sexual health education, moving beyond mere biology to address social behaviours and boundaries. A recent report from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health noted that 27% of female students admitted being pressured to do something sexual that they did not want to do - 15% of these respondents reported having oral sex just to avoid having intercourse. Young women need tools, support, and strong role models to better negotiate sexual activity in a way that is truly safe and



Participants of our Bowling 4 Change fundraiser (November 2007) - together, we raised \$12,000 for the ReAct program!

comfortable for them. In general, we must re-evaluate all of our school programs to ensure they have a gender analysis and are culturally appropriate.

Funding is another issue for schools. It's all about proper training for teachers, strengthening teachers college curricula, and understanding the neighbourhood context. The TDSB is stretched for resources and its student population is complex. Schools need to be better integrated with communities, and the needs of parents and guardians must be matched with their children's needs so the disconnection between school and home life isn't as large. There are many good community resources to tap into, and government funding has to be dedicated to bringing more youth workers and violence prevention initiatives into schools.

The Road to Health report and its recommendations were generally well accepted by the school board, media, government, and community. Given the organization's focus, METRAC could further participate by assisting in future evaluations of how report recommendations were implemented to address gender-based violence. Additionally, given the Minister of Education's announcement that the government will fund an in-depth study on gender-based violence, this is another area that METRAC can be involved in the future. *The full Road to Health Report is available at schoolsafetypanel.com/finalreport.html*

Safety in Schools & on Campuses

Narina Nagra (Safety Director)

Safety is a word that gets tossed around a lot lately. We hear about safety on the news, in government policy, on talk shows, in cafeterias, and in boardrooms across the country. The problem is what we are talking about. The concept of safety, like most words and ideas in our society, has been twisted and re-framed to reflect interests of dominant people, and not those of particularly vulnerable communities. Therefore, we hear quite a bit about the safety of the nation, its borders, and our property, but very little about the safety of Aboriginal peoples, the homeless, or women and girls.

*4 out of 5 female undergraduates
on Canadian campuses
are victims of violence
in a dating relationship*

Until recently. Sexual assaults on campuses have received nation-wide publicity due to several reported incidents at York, Carleton, and Wilfrid Laurier universities, to name a few. The release of the *The Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety* and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's report on sexual harassment in 23 Ontario schools confirms the overwhelming rates of sexual assault and harassment experienced by girls and young women in our secondary schools.

What this proves is that campuses and public schools are not immune from the influence of dominant discourse about safety. And they are certainly no stranger to violence against women. In fact, Statistics Canada (2006) reports that 4 out of 5 female undergraduates on Canadian campuses are victims of violence in a dating relationship. But what is most important of all is how these educational institutions respond to the reality of sexual assault in the day to day lives of all women and girls.

Today, when safety of women is discussed by the media and public institutions, it is done from the perspective of "enhancing security" by putting responsibility on women - women need to be extra careful and not take any "unnecessary" risks, such as walking alone at night

Update: Twin & RAP Projects

Through the Twin Project, funded by the Ontario Government and Family Law Education for Women (FLEW), we've been running focus groups with women and leaders in Christian faith communities and women who are domestic caregivers. Family law information materials will be created to suit their unique needs. Also, through recent funding from the Ministry of the Attorney General, we are leading "Respect for All People (RAP)" trainings for Ontario service providers to address and prevent hate crimes.

leaving bedroom doors unlocked. But very little is said or done about preventative actions and education to the perpetrators of violence against women, date rape, and sexual assault. We live in a culture that deems it normal and acceptable for women to feel unsafe alone at night. And fear of violence affects what women choose to wear, where they go, whom they go with, and how they travel. It limits women's choices on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, women's fears and concerns are often ignored in discussions about violence.

Here at METRAC, we continue to challenge these notions and dominant paradigms and seek to make sustainable change for all women and girls to live free from all forms of violence, discrimination, and harassment. Our Community Safety Program works in partnership with a number of stakeholders throughout the City of Toronto to create safer spaces for all, but in particular, those most vulnerable to violence. We work with city staff, councillors, public institutions, university and college campuses, site planners and developers, real estate companies, and community organizations. And METRAC's Safety Audit is an important tool that continues to redress the safety concerns of marginalized communities in public spaces.

It is imperative that our educational institutions challenge the myths surrounding rape, sexual assault, and violence against women and work with all stakeholders and experts in the field to create safer spaces for women.

Young Women & Reporting Violence

Chantal Bombardier (Justice Program Coordinator) and Zahra Dhanani (Legal Director)

A black rectangular poster with white text. The top line reads 'METRAC's Annual General Meeting'. Below it, 'Save the date: Thursday June 12' and 'Location to be announced' are listed, followed by the time '6:00-8:00 PM'. A horizontal line separates this from the next section: 'With panel discussion on current issues related to gendered violence'. Another horizontal line follows, and the bottom line provides contact information: 'Info: 416-392-3135 | www.metrac.org'. The background of the poster features a faint, stylized graphic of hands.

More than ever, young women are at risk of being violated at schools, by the state, and by familial and intimate contacts. While violence against young women continues to take place, it has increased in frequency and access. With the introduction of social networking sites such as Facebook, online messaging, and text messaging, women's privacy and safety are placed in jeopardy and legislation has yet to catch up.

For young women who are all the more marginalized due to their diverse identities, the risk of being harmed is even greater. For instance, a study reports that 75% of Aboriginal girls under the age of 18 have experienced sexual abuse. 50% of them are under 14 and almost 25% are younger than 7 years old (McIvor and Nahanee, 1998).

Despite the staggering numbers of women experiencing violence, we continue to see that women, irrespective of their age, are under-reporting it. Only 25% of cases of domestic violence are reported to the police. There are many reasons for this, but it is largely due to the fact that there are limited tangible support systems in place to ensure that women will be safe after they report situations of violence.

Young women in particular have a lack of trust in the justice and education systems. They do not believe that they will be protected upon reporting. A lot of women actually feel that if they report the violence they experience, it will only get worse. A gross and unfortunate example of this is the recent detainment of 19-year old Noellee Mowatt. She phoned the police to report abuse from her partner, and he was arrested, charged, and detained. Ms. Mowatt was summoned to

testify at court, but she did not attend because she did not want to testify. As a result, she was picked up and put in jail, nine months pregnant and being re-victimized by the criminal justice system. In a news report, Ms. Mowatt stated: "I will never call the police ever again."

This recent example highlights the risk that younger women - and racialized and immigrant women in particular - face when they report violence. They are often not taken seriously and their needs for protection go unmet. The way that judges and police officers have dealt with Noellee Mowatt shows a complete lack of understanding of the dynamics of gender-based violence against women. This case also highlights the fact that our legal system has a long way to go before it can enhance safety and demonstrate understanding, especially for young victims.

This stark reality is mirrored in our education system. The Road to Health report on school safety clearly articulated the fact that gendered violence is a "pervasive problem." It also highlighted the fact that "sexual assault and sexual harassment, is occurring at alarming rates and is largely going unreported."

We desperately need to create systems that make it safe for women and girls to report and get appropriate responses to the violence they experience. This will take not only a critical analysis of how our systems operate to the detriment of women and girls, but we are also overdue for a complete overhaul. If we do not change our systems and increase supports for women and girls, they will continue to face violence and not report it.

Update: RePlay 2.0 Project

METRAC is working in partnership with Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions (COPA) to create a French version of the RePlay video game, entitled Rejouer: Chercher Zoé. This "RePlay 2.0" project was funded by the Government of Ontario. We are currently completing a draft of the French game to test with Francophone youth across the province.

Learning Safety & Equity

Andrea Gunraj (Outreach Director) and Alana Lowe (ReAct Coordinator)



RePlay: Finding Zoe video game, presented at the International Emmy Academy in New York City by METRAC and Take Action Games (October 2007)

Creating safe, equitable schools starts with relevant, real, and accessible education and prevention - if people don't know what the issues are, how can they make a difference? This is exactly what METRAC's Community Outreach and Education Program and its Respect in Action: Youth Preventing Violence (ReAct) initiative focus on. Diverse students, youth workers, social workers, parents, administration, and educators need support to better understand the manifestations of and solutions to gender-based violence in school and neighbourhood contexts.

ReAct trains and supports Peer Youth Facilitators to lead violence prevention workshops, trainings, and speaking engagements with youth, educators, and youth workers across the city. A great deal of the work we do involves challenging stereotypes and myths about gendered violence, which are alive and well in our society, schools, and other institutions. For example, we've found that the myth that "some communities are more violent towards women and girls" is widespread, even though gendered violence cuts across all race, class, ethnic, and religious lines. If left unchallenged, these myths can negatively impact the effectiveness of youth workers, educators, and youth in responding to and preventing violence against diverse women and girls.

The preventative work ReAct does has been in even higher demand in Toronto and beyond since the start of 2008, especially our youth workshops and train-the-

trainers for educators. As important as it is for us to get out into schools, it's equally important that more public and private funding be dedicated to this work so that supply can truly meet community demand.

The Youth Alliance Project (YAP), funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation, is another Outreach initiative that seeks to make schools and communities safer for young women. The YAP is a youth-driven collective focused on issues of violence against women and girls, working to strengthen the capacities of youth to advocate for improvements to our city's existing approaches to addressing this violence. The collective is headed up by a 15-member committee, made of youth-led organizations, student unions, and youth and women-serving organizations. YAP members have developed Terms of Reference and are preparing a literature review on gendered violence, including results of a survey for young women on violence and oppression. Over the summer, a training/mentorship program will be implemented with 25 youth aged 13 to 17 - through popular educative sessions, these youth participants will build their civic engagement skills, such as messaging through the media, deputing at City Hall, and organizing community forums and initiatives. We're very excited about where and how this project will leave its mark!

We're doing more to promote safety, beyond the classroom. Girl Guides of Canada-Guides du Canada (GGC) recently received funding from the Government of Ontario to partner and implement the "Girl EmPower" Project with METRAC. We'll work with girls and leaders in GGC groups to create a comprehensive training and activity program to prevent the proliferation of abuse and help young women build healthy, equal relationships. The most exciting part will be the development of a Girl EmPower badge - designed by GGC girls themselves - for thousands of diverse Brownies, Guides, and Pathfinders to earn and add to their collection. Because in this society, more young women need to be supported to resist violence and oppression, and they should be able to wear their empowerment for the whole world to see!

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METRAC also thanks: our wonderful Bowling 4 Change Team Captains, Bowlers, and everyone who made a pledge to support bowling teams

Staff, Board, Volunteers, Interns, Donors, & Partners:

We extend our thanks to METRAC's dedicated staff, board, volunteers, and placement students. Thank you to departing staff member Clara Ho, as well as departing ReAct Peer Facilitators, volunteers, and placement students for their hard work. METRAC would also like to thank our community partners, including organizations and individuals dedicated to ending violence against women, youth, and children. Finally, we extend sincere thanks to individual and anonymous donors who have contributed to METRAC since fall 2007 - we could not survive without your support.

METRAC is "going green": METRAC is transitioning to an online/email newsletter format to benefit the environment and produce less waste. Printed copies of newsletters will be still be available to people who do not have internet access.