

A CAPPELLA

A report on the realities, concerns, expectations and barriers experienced by adolescent women in Canada

Summary of a report made by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) in November 1990.

In 1990, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) undertook an important study on adolescent women. The report drawn from the first phase of the project was called **A CAPPELLA** because the authors made the observation that Canadian adolescent women lived "a cappella", without instrumental accompaniment to keep them on track. Young women questioned in the framework of this study declared that their lives lacked the structure, familiarity and sense of direction that former generations had experienced. Canadian adolescent women of today are then practising this high-risk musical style and, for the most part, their song is not being heard.

This project, proposed by the CTF, was designed to contribute to a greater understanding of the challenges and concerns facing adolescent women in the 90s. Previous studies had focused on adolescents in general in such a way that it was necessary to look at the specific life experiences of adolescent women and let **them** express **themselves**.

The project was divided into two phases. This report provides an account of the first phase, for which funding was received from the Department of the Secretary of State. It involved a brief review of the literature specific to adolescent women's issues, contacts with youth-serving organizations and especially the design of a method for holding discussion groups with adolescent women across Canada. These discussions were held and results analyzed. Phase II will concentrate more on the search for solutions and improvements following the observations emerging from the Report of Phase I. Suggestions will be formulated and information materials will be created from the study's data. Also regional meetings bringing together key individuals working with adolescents are scheduled to discuss the implications of the data obtained and elements to be changed. A final report will then summarize the results of these meetings.

A CAPPELLA invited approximately one thousand adolescent girls aged 11 to 19. About one hundred teachers from all provinces and territories led discussion groups. They proceeded from a multitude of resources provided to favour a honest and thoughtful discussion because answers had to be sincere and in the adolescent women's own words. For instance, teachers could use personal questionnaires, scenarios, direct discussion or ask students to anonymously write on slips of paper a word or phrase which was then discussed by the group. Group leaders were asked to choose two or more of these approaches. A broad representation, made up of a few francophone groups and a majority of anglophone groups, was thought to reflect the diversity of age, experiences, cultural backgrounds and special circumstances which influence the needs and perceptions of teenage women

The central purpose of the groups was to identify ten or twelve major concerns of adolescent women in Canada today from a list of issues. Several more operational objectives were given to teachers.

Two general themes emerged from a primary analysis of the results; first, what adolescent women think about themselves and second, what they think about. Teenage women, like everyone else,

struggle with immediate concerns and larger life issues. For instance, in answer to the question "Can you name three things you thought about last week?", they gave answers such as "My boyfriend", "My grades", "My future career" or "Environmental issues".

In spite of current doubts and concerns about the future, many of the comments indicate that, in general, young women like themselves. They particularly value their "people" skills and gain much of their positive feelings toward themselves from their relationships with others. When asked what three things about themselves make them feel good, some of the girls provided answers such as: "I am getting fairly good marks in school", "My sister and I are getting along beautifully", "Volunteering" or "My friends".

Issues which concern adolescent women

The main purpose of the discussion groups was to identify the major issue/topics/interests of young women. The authors of the report created groupings in order to have some issues encompassing many elements.

Global issues

Firstly, let us mention that politics, the environment and global issues are topics which concern young women a lot. The depletion of the ozone layer, pollution, destruction of forests and wildlife extinction were mentioned as world problems which the girls thought and cared about. On the list of topics of interest in the questionnaire, environment was the first most often chosen issue of interest/concern (chosen by 77.6% of respondents). Poverty in the world was chosen by 64.2%. A little closer to home, crime was of concern to 56.2% of the girls and poverty in the community to 40%.

Many young women expressed fears about the future. Four respondents in five agreed with the statement "I really believe that things like pollution and the threat of nuclear war are robbing me of my future".

Other comments indicate that teenage women despair about the ability of the political system to respond to their interests and represent their concerns, or to care about youth. Political corruption and general unfairness in the world (racial discrimination, poverty and religious persecution) were mentioned voluntarily by many girls. For many, social issues were more personal and were approached from their impact on friends.

Love and sexuality

Following environment, love was rated the number two topic of interest/concern (chosen by 76.1%), while sex was chosen by 66.8%. We can understand these impressive figures by considering that teenage years are a time for rapid changes in emotional and sexual maturity and that consequences are also potentially far-reaching: pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault and emotional pain. Many teenage women are perplexed by boys' attitudes and behaviour and are frustrated by their lack of communication skills and ability to deal with their emotions.

One big concern is the need to find the right boyfriend, which does not seem easy. Some girls said that they would not make love with anybody while others talked about their experience of abortion

or pregnancy. Other girls were more positive about their sexuality and relationships with boys, although this type of comment was more rare. One teacher-leader was surprised and dismayed to note that girls continue to get their status from having a boyfriend.

Self-image, confidence and self-esteem

According to the questionnaire, 78.6% of the girls could agree with the statement "I really feel good about myself". Yet other comments indicate the struggles many adolescent girls go through to maintain a positive self-image. In the questionnaire, 48.2% of the girls agreed that being popular was a big worry for them. However, 85% agreed that they worry a lot about how they look. One respondent even declared: "I don't think that I know one girl who is satisfied with her looks". Another said: "I don't like anything about myself but I'm trying to change what I am".

Careers and future plans

Careers ranked fifth out of 34 interests/concerns listed in the participant's questionnaire. Teenage women must make important decisions concerning their future: the choice of a career, whether or not to stay in school and/or leave home, to have children early or later, etc. These decisions are often made with a great deal of uncertainty and often under pressure from others. For many girls, they are made in the absence of real options (for example, a secure home life or money to attend university). A number of comments indicate the realism with which these girls approach decisions concerning their future, and, in particular, the importance of studying.

Other relationships : friends and family

Many teacher-leaders noted the importance of friendships in young girls' lives, especially during difficult moments. Equally important to the young people in these groups were relationships with family members. The girls took pride in good relationships they had with brothers and sisters and despaired about fights and bad feelings with them. One group leader reported that many participants had at least thought about, if not gone through, the experience of hearing their parents threaten to send them away from home. As we can suspect, family conflicts and separations have serious effects on young women.

Alcohol and drugs

Alcohol and drug use surfaced as an issue of importance to teenage women. Street drugs are of greater concern than prescription drugs in the young women's eyes. It is interesting to note that only a few girls talked about struggling with their own use of drugs and/or alcohol; most prefer to talk about their friends' or parents' problems. Clearly, parental addictions affect teenagers and are often linked to abuse, poor communication with children and a feeling of abandonment by many young people. Teenagers are as concerned about how to deal with addictions among those close to them as they are about the pressures to use drugs and their effects on themselves.

In responding to the fictional scenarios provided as discussion stimulants, group participants showed their awareness of the potential harmfulness of drug/alcohol use, and clearly related its abuse to emotional problems, family conflicts and stress.

Physical and sexual abuse

Physical and sexual abuse, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children by family members, wife battering, date rape, "stranger" assaults and physical abuse by boyfriends, are all of concern to the young women. In the analysis of the questionnaires, child abuse and sexual abuse ranked 7th and 11th, respectively, in the issues that are of interest or concern to teenage women. While it is not clear how many of these girls had personal experiences with violence, it is apparent from their comments and reactions to the discussion scenarios that many had lived or currently were living with violence in their families. The girls in the survey acknowledged the severe consequences of sexual abuse; they know that this experience has lasting effects on their ability to trust people, to like themselves and to live a happy life; they also think that not being believed adds to the trauma of abuse. The participants expressed outrage that the justice system continues to blame the victims of abuse.

The quality of education and school life

A significant number of students expressed dissatisfactions with the education system. Many felt that the curriculum materials lacked relevance to their lives and their futures. Other girls stated that their classes were too focused on facts and information, and did not allow for enough time to discuss issues. Adolescent girls in these discussion groups projected a strong sense of being silenced in the school system. They also voiced a number of concerns about the fairness of the school system; they believe that cheating on exams and assignments is widespread, that dishonest students are often rewarded with good grades and that teachers' favouritism allows unfairness to continue.

Balancing priorities: everyday challenges

Adolescent women today live full lives. The girls themselves believe that their lives are more complicated, and that they live under more pressure than their mother's generation. 70% agreed with the statement "Sometimes I don't think I can make it through the day with all my school work, my social life, and all the other things people expect me to do". 46% of these full-time students have a part-time job; almost half of the students who work are at their jobs ten or more hours per week. Moreover, teenagers are involved in other activities (sports, drama, volunteer work). Added to family responsibilities, friends and boyfriends, these commitments result in a very full life, and in some cases, a great deal of stress.

As women: equal rights, discrimination, choices and abilities

The great majority of respondents think that women today have just as good a chance of succeeding in life as men. While a few felt that there were no differences in the way they were treated compared to boys, almost all detected at least some unfairness, for example, in sports or in the freedom boys were given at home. Many were very resentful of and angry at boys who appear to "get it all without really trying". Of the groups that were asked whether girls have different concerns than boys, all responded yes, citing rape and pregnancy as the major differences. Women's rights, greater concern for the environment and other world issue and the need to be aware of their appearance and reputation were also mentioned.

Another group of girls acknowledged the existence of gender discrimination, but were

uncomfortable in identifying with feminists. Still others were very positive about their future and their ability to compete in the world and to lead a balanced life. In general, they felt that careers were much more important to them than to their mothers, but that they also wanted a family life.

Conclusion

Young women worry about those close to them, their schoolwork, jobs, relationships and world events. They are also preoccupied with planning for the future, the need to make career choices and the crises and dangers they and their friends are exposed to. The girls themselves, however, see their concerns as quite different from those of their mothers, fathers and teachers and as a result, often don't feel understood by them. However, a number of their concerns remain the same as those of previous generations. Teenagers continue to worry about popularity, their appearance, school events, etc.

Obviously, young teenagers are concerned about their first periods, about beginning to date and about conflicts with brothers and sisters, while older teens think about leaving home and about what the future will hold.

It is easy to see the degree to which the issues and concerns of teenagers defy traditional categorization such as teenage pregnancy, AIDS, alcohol and drug abuse, etc. Each of the subjects they take up is intimately linked to others. For example, alcohol and drug abuse often results from school and job pressure, insecurities about appearance, painful conflicts at home or sexual abuse. All of these issues are dealt with in the context of on-going school and job responsibilities, social events, world events and daily living. This context must be taken in account in order to better understand young women.

Feedback on the group discussions, by both student participants and teacher-leaders, was very positive. One dissatisfaction was the brevity of the meetings. Young women declared that discussions allowed them to take time to reflect and that they felt someone cared about them.

Since the purpose was to value the strengths of adolescent girls, authors found comments very relevant. Many adolescent women feel the unfavourable comparisons to boys and the negative stereotypes that are prevalent in our society.

When this project was originally conceived, Phase II was thought of as a round of focus groups with young women designed to flesh out what was expected to be relatively superficial data emerging from Phase I. It is now clear that we greatly underestimated the tide of data, both in its volume and its intensity.

The data raise questions about the wisdom of some key strategies underlying current approaches to meeting the needs of adolescents. For example:

- *Most career education should help adolescent girls to attain their goals by putting away the Cinderella-like 1960s model of dependency.*
- *Our awareness of shifting gender roles has focused on expanding the assertiveness and aspirations of young women. Little has been designed to address issues or to encourage change in adolescent males.*

- *Concerns about sexuality and relationships preoccupy adolescents. The schools' (and society's) apparent reluctance to acknowledge the lowering threshold of sexual activity and the increased complexity of adolescent sexuality must be addressed.*

- *We must stop thinking that group discussions cannot be realized in the school environment. This study shows that discussions are possible and that teenagers ask for it.*

The research affirmed the importance of dialogue, face-to-face human contact and support among girls and between teachers and students. Adolescent women need a forum where they feel safe in expressing their fears and perceptions and in sharing their story. Many opportunities exist in the design of educational materials and strategies to focus on the positive aspects of teenage women's lives, to reinforce their coping abilities and to celebrate their strengths. In the right environment, teenagers can provide supportive, understanding and positive role models for each other in the areas of self-esteem, image and appearance, "people" skills, career planning and priority setting. Similarly, the problems and crises they face personally and through their friends and family can be dealt with in a way that gives them hope and empowers them to make changes.

Chlamydia infection in street youth: Need for more aggressive screening programs

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Objectives. To determine, first, the sexual practices among street youth in the Ottawa-Carleton, Ontario region; second, the percentage of street youth who report previous sexually transmitted disease (STD) screening; and third, the rate of previous infection with *Chlamydia trachomatis* in this population.

Methodology. This prospective street youth pilot study was cross-sectional in design. Street youth aged 15 to 20 were recruited through a drop-in centre or shelter in Ottawa, Ontario between August and October 1993. Information on demographics, substance use, current sexual practices and STD screening and infection history were obtained through a structured face-to-face interview and a 75-item questionnaire. Past *C trachomatis* infection was determined by microimmunofluorescence assay with purified antigens of *C trachomatis* (serovars A to K), *Chlamydia psittaci* (avian strain 6BC) and *Chlamydia pneumoniae* (TW-1 83 strain).

Results. Ninety-eight per cent of the youth approached participated. Of the 100 street youth (61 males, mean age 17.8 years; 39 females, mean age 17.1 years), 94% were sexually active, with 21% of males and 26% of females having had four or more different sexual partners in the previous year. Only 27% of males and 8% of females reported consistent condom use with all partners all of the time. Thirty per cent of males and 50% of females reported previous STD testing. Of the 100 street youth, 22 (16 males and six females) had had previous *C trachomatis* infection by serotesting, but only three of 16 (19%) of these males and three of six (50%) of these females reported previous STD testing. None of the 22 recalled previous diagnosis or treatment for any STD.

Conclusion.

These street youth reported a high prevalence of risky sexual behaviour. This supports the national STD guidelines for targeted screening in this population. The current screening guidelines for *C trachomatis* in this population do not reach the majority of street youth.

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