

Violence in adolescent dating relationships

Conjugal violence is a subject which has been given wide media coverage and about which the public is well aware. However, we cannot say the same for violence in adolescent dating relationships, a phenomenon which is, unfortunately, very real. Actually the extent, modalities, causes, and conceivable solutions to this problem are not well known. This article will, therefore, report on some of the studies on the subject done in Quebec and elsewhere.

1. The Problem

The word "dating" used here refers to any love or romantic relationship in which two people, without living together, are involved with one another for an undefined length of time - one-night stands as well as short or long-term relationships. The term "violence" refers to any action or threat of action that limits the partner's development by undermining his or her psychological, physical or sexual integrity.

The concern for violence in the context of adolescent relationships is relatively recent. Research on the subject was first carried out at the beginning of the 1980s; in Quebec it began only in the 1990s. The idyllic image we have of the young couple has really prevented potential help from reaching the adolescent victims of violence, often because the public is so touched by the notion of adolescent love in all its sweetness and awkwardness. Moreover, parents, when dealing with the first love experiences of their children, are generally inclined to leave them alone for fear of disturbing or interfering; young couples are seen as private entities and are defended as such by the youngsters themselves. The rape of young girls which has been given much media attention could have shattered this image and this policy of non-interference, but it has not been the case, for in people's minds, rapes are committed by strangers and do not concern adolescent couples. The problem has finally been raised by professionals who have recorded testimonies of young victims. As a result, there is now scientific interest in this issue.

2. Extent of the phenomenon

In the United States, Ageton did a longitudinal study (1983) on a representative sample of 1,626 adolescents aged 13 to 19. This study shows the prevalence of sexual violence experienced by female adolescents varying from 2,6% to 15% according to the age and the year studied. The prevalence of sexual violence exercised by the boys of this sample was between 0,8% and 8%. In 85% of all cases, the aggressor knew the victim and the violence usually took place within a love affair or during a date.

In Canada, during an exploratory study done in the Toronto area, Mercer (1988) found that 20% of the female adolescents had experienced general violence on a date. Also in this study, 13% of the boys admitted to having committed at least one act of violence against a female partner, violence of a verbal, sexual or, more rarely, physical nature.

In Quebec, Poitras and Lavoie (1994) turned their attention to the prevalence of sexual violence experienced or exercised by both sexes, without limiting themselves to considering girls as victims and boys as aggressors. Their preliminary study was also aimed at systematically

exploring the coercive strategies in use and the types of unwanted sexual activities experienced by adolescents. Carried out in a public school in the Quebec City area, this research included a sample of 644 middle-class, heterosexual adolescents aged 14 to 19 (average 16,5). These 336 girls and 308 boys, all from Grades 10 and 11, had already dated in the past. The majority of these adolescents had already had love affairs that lasted more than a month. Their sexual activities took the form of necking and petting. More than half of the respondents said that they had also had sexual intercourse at least once.

The prevalence of sexual violence experienced by respondents was 54% for the girls and 13% for the boys, while 6% of the girls and 14% of the boys admitted to having inflicted some form of sexual violence on their partner. At first glance, these figures may seem higher than those of other studies but, because of differences between the measurement scales and the samples, it would be risky to hastily compare. However, an interesting conclusion can be drawn from all this research: boys are invariably more often instigators of sexual violence, while girls are mostly the victims of it. This phenomenon could be explained, among others, by the social roles attributed to men and women.

In a study by Gagné, Lavoie and Hébert (1994) using five classes of Grade 10 students from a Quebec City private school, 33% of the girls stated that they had experienced sexual violence. In the same study, 11% of the boys said that they had been victims of sexual violence, while 13% said that they had exercised this type of violence, compared to 2,4% of the girls. In a significant way, more respondents said that they had experienced sexual violence instead of exercising it. Interestingly, the respondents of this study were also asked if they had ever witnessed sexual violence in other adolescent couples. More than one third answered affirmatively. The fact of surveying only middle and upper-class respondents has probably not affected the results because Koss and Harvey (1991) observed that factors such as social class and income do not influence the prevalence of rape.

It is important to consider all these statistics with caution. Actually, from a subjective standpoint, nothing proves that sexual violence is recognized as such by adolescents who exercise or experience it; this implies a certain influence on the answers. On the other hand, it is plausible that the perception of abuse depends, among other things, on the cause people attribute to it. Due to the reluctance to discuss the subject of violence, certain inherent difficulties can confuse the issue. When a victim knows the aggressor, it can be hard for him/her to identify the kind of abuse experienced because of his/her emotional involvement with this person. The phenomenon of social desirability can also influence the way aggressors and victims answer, or even the definition they have of abusive behaviours. Consequently, the real extent of violence in dating relationships is hard to assess.

3. Types of Violence

According to Lavoie (1992), all forms of violence identified in the adult world exist among young people too. Many adolescents, therefore, experience physical and sexual abuse, threats, insults, denigration, social control, indifference and harassment. Moreover, a certain type of abusive behaviour seems specific to adolescent dating and affects girls more. To clarify, the adolescent boy spreads rumours to blemish the reputation of the girl following the break-up of the relationship or the girl's refusal to have sexual intercourse.

In Poitras' and Lavoie's study (1994), kisses, necking and petting were the most common types of unwanted sexual experiences, followed by sexual intercourse, then closely after, attempts of penetration. Acts of anal or oral sex were much less frequent. The aggressors, in order to get what they wanted, tended to favour verbal coercion as a strategy. They also resorted, in lesser proportions, to the threat of or the use of physical force or, more rarely, to the deliberate use of drugs or alcohol. Finally, only a few of them turned to the abuse of authority, probably because situations in which adolescents are in positions of authority are less frequent than in the adult world. It is possible that some adolescents used this strategy toward younger children instead of toward partners of their own age; this would explain the very low prevalence of this type of strategy (3% of the girls were victims of it compared to 45% using verbal coercion).

Gagné, Lavoie and Hébert (1994) asked adolescents if they had observed, exercised or experienced certain types of sexually violent behaviours in the year prior to the completion of the questionnaire, and if yes, how often. Sexual harassment was the most commonly observed and experienced behaviour among adolescents of this sample. Belittling the partner who refuses to have sexual intercourse, threatening to break up the relationship if sexual intercourse is refused, getting a partner to take drugs or alcohol in order to have intercourse were some of the other behaviours often observed during this study.

4. Knowledge of the subject and attitudes of adolescents

Lavoie and Vézina (1994) conducted a study to survey the myths and attitudes of adolescents toward violence in the context of dating. Being aware of these attitudes makes it easier to elaborate a prevention and public awareness campaign. From a Quebec City high school, 133 girls and 126 boys in Grade 9, (average age of 14,8) were surveyed for this research. Fourteen was the target age because many consider that, at this age, there is a transition, that is, adolescents become interested in intimate relationships and many have already dated.

First of all, the researchers wanted to know to what extent adolescents were aware of the problem (frequency of violence). About 40% of the students gave the same answers as in other studies, that is, that 20% of young people are subjected to violence while dating. Another 10% overestimated, while half of them, particularly the boys, underestimated the frequency of this problem.

As well, respondents had to say whether or not they agreed with statements about violence in general, sexual violence, egalitarian relations and control of others. As for general violence, students seemed conscious that it could be part of an adolescent relationship, even if the partners did not live together. They also believed that the socio-economic background did not influence the probability of living this type of violence. The majority defined violence within the couple in part as threats of and psychological violence. About two adolescents in five thought that it was better to avoid certain subjects of conversation or certain behaviours in order to put an end to violence, and about nine out of ten knew that violence could continue once the relationship had ended.

The myth that rape is mainly committed by a stranger was shared by 40% of all respondents, although 83% said that a girl could be raped by her boyfriend. Forty-five percent of the students

thought that sexual violence could not be committed by a girl. One in three thought that one had the right to expect or demand sexual relations after dating a person for a long time. More than a quarter of the group did not think that it was really a question of rape if the victim accepted the sexual activities in the first place, then backed down while the partner continued. A little more than one in ten attributed a certain responsibility to the female victim of rape because she could have turned her partner on or caused the situation.

Questions concerning egalitarian relationships and domination revealed that one adolescent in four had an idealized vision of relationships between husbands and wives, that is, that they respect each other, never argue, and share the same tastes and activities. However, no less than 56% thought that jealousy is proof of love which slightly qualifies this ideal perception. The vast majority (85%) were conscious that the fear of losing a partner can make one accept behaviours which are really not acceptable.

Generally, boys are less well informed about violence and adhere more to erroneous notions of it than girls. Perhaps this is due to age or experience with love, but it would be interesting to verify if it would not rather depend on the influence of a collection of attitudes shared by society in general. Major conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, many young people underestimate the frequency of violence in adolescent relationships. Forty percent think that the majority of rapes are committed by strangers. However, facts reveal that only 12% of rapes are perpetrated by strangers and that, on the contrary, 57% of them take place during a date. Furthermore, a sizeable number tend to attribute the responsibility of a sexually violent behaviour to the victim instead of blaming the aggressor. These results provide us with useful clues for elaborating future prevention programs that will take into account the gaps in adolescents' perceptions.

5. Perceived causes

A study by Robitaille and Lavoie (1992) suggests that it is possible to divide the perceived causes of violence into three categories: individual causes (eg. jealousy, alcohol or drug consumption, previous experience of violence), relational causes (eg. communication problems, sadomasochism) and finally, social causes (eg. peer pressure and pornography).

Gagné (1992) conducted research, using 151 adolescents aged 14 to 17, in which she asked them to identify from among 12 possible causes a maximum of three reasons why boys are violent toward their female partner or girls toward their male partner. Results showed that jealousy is seen as a major cause of emotional and physical violence. Paradoxically, other studies report that many adolescents considered jealousy a sign of affection, while it has been proven that people who exercise physical violence manifest more problems with jealousy than others. Behavioural problems, alcohol or drug consumption and a tendency to dominate were causes associated more frequently with men's than women's violence according to the respondents (Gagné, (1993). Conversely, vengeance and responses to provocation were more often considered motives for women's violence. About a third of the respondents considered anger an important factor in both women's and men's violence. Furthermore, girls tended to explain men's violence as a response to intimidation while boys tended to explain it as a response to provocation; this difference is significant.

Gagné, Lavoie and Hébert (1994), in another study, suggested ten possible causes for sexual violence. From these, respondents had to select a maximum of three major causes. Satisfaction of a sexual need, alcohol or drug consumption, behavioural problems and the incapacity to control oneself when sexually excited were the frequently named causes of violence. Generally, the respondents perceived alcohol and drug consumption, provocation of a partner and the will to dominate a partner as factors that cause boys, in particular, to behave violently. Domination aside, these explanations excuse a violent behaviour by putting the blame on the victim or on a substance. Moreover, according to this study, it seems that sexual aggressors tend to minimize their abusive behaviour.

An inventory of surveys on violence allowed Lavoie (1994) to identify the factors, according to adolescents, which most often triggered violent behaviour within the couple. Jealousy came first on the list, followed by disagreement regarding alcohol consumption or over a refusal of sexual intercourse, then peer pressure and drug abuse. Girls said that the main reason why they resort to violence is the need to protect themselves, while boys use violence more in order to intimidate (21% of them).

Thanks to epidemiological research, violence in the context of dating has been associated with some risk factors and some populations at risk. General violence seems to be related to certain factors. Attitudes of young men toward premarital violence, low self-esteem, divergence in the couple regarding sexual roles, and stressful events not related to health are considered risk factors both for victim and aggressor. Frequently, victims come from families which are cold, distant, families in which they may have experienced psychological violence. These young people may, therefore, be more vulnerable if exposed to it again. Some risk factors are commonly associated with sexual violence. For instance, the adolescent male aggressor appears to need to control his partner, has problems discussing sex with partner, uses alcohol, has certain ideas on sexual roles; any young girl may become the victim of sexual violence. Victims of incest are likely to become victims of sexual violence.

6. Conclusion

All these results are interesting, but we have to be careful when interpreting them. Actually, since the studies are usually based on closed questions, the answers might have been different had the respondents been allowed to answer in their own words.

American and Canadian prevention programs (21) have been developed taking into account the following six issues, in order of importance: inequality between men and women, previous violence in the family (learning), poor communication, stress, personality traits, and peer pressure.

All these findings regarding young people at risk have revived the debate between those who favour programs dealing with the specific problem and those who favour a global approach in dealing with these teens. Prevention programs on violence in adolescent dating relationships will be discussed in an up-coming issue of **PRO-TEEN**.

7. References

This article was summarized from the following articles given by Ms Francine Lavoie:

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