CSWS Research Matters

Partner Violence and Girls' Educational and Vocational Development

In-depth interviews reveal a broad range of violence against girls—with far-reaching and enduring effects

BY KRISTA M. CHRONISTER, Associate Professor, University of Oregon College of Education, Counseling Psychology Program

> "I was going to school, like every day, and I didn't miss like one day. And I was doing great in school I wanted to go to college, and I wanted to be a vet and everything, and that was pretty much my goal. And then when I met him it was like all downhill from there, like I stopped going to school. And I didn't know what I wanted to do cuz I didn't know if I could ever do it because of what he was saying, so he definitely impacted my future..."
> — Emily,* 16 years old

At 85 percent, women make up the overwhelming majority of reported partner violence victims in the United States,[1] and partner violence is the most common form of violence against women around the world.[2] Although all communities experience partner violence,[3] there are significant disparities in partner violence rates and individuals' access to services in marginalized communities.[4] To date, girls, ages 16–24 years, are most at risk for experiencing dating violence.[5] Studies conducted with youth from diverse identity, socioeconomic, and geographic communities suggest dating abuse rates range from 25 percent to 50 percent.[6]

Several contextual and developmental challenges make adolescence and early adulthood an especially vulnerable time for partner violence. Adolescence and emerging adulthood are developmental periods associated with increased identity exploration, instability, experimentation with substance use, romantic relationships, and parenting responsibilities.[7] Negotiation of such developmental transitions, in a sociocultural context that provides little support and affirmation for youth and marginalizes their experiences, places this group at particular risk for violence.[8]

National data show that nearly 10 percent of adolescents reported physical violence from a dating partner in the previous year, and nearly three of every 10 adolescents reported psychological abuse victimization in the previous year.[9] Girls experience a broad range of dating abuse from their partners. Our team's in-depth interviews with 19 girls from racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse backgrounds revealed the breadth of violence that girls experienced and the far-reaching and enduring impact of such violence on their educational engagement and vocational development.[10]

Girls experienced a broad range of emotional, physical, and sexual violence. We found several distinct consequences of such violence on their school engagement, in particular. Decreases in school engagement included missing more days from school, receiving less instructional time, and an immediate decline in academic performance. Girls' decline was the result of several factors: abusive partners emotionally and physically abused girls at school, and consequently, girls were unable to attend or concentrate in classes; partners did not allow girls to attend school; and partners interfered with girls' studying and homework completion. Second, girls struggled to stay engaged in school and perform well because they were healing from physical wounds and experiencing depression, anxiety, and shame. Third, most girls were engaged in substance use that seriously impacted their school engagement and performance. Substance use often was

UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

the activity that first connected girls with abusive partners or partners forced girls to use alcohol and other drugs. Finally, girls often experienced isolation and rejection from family members, peers, and school personnel. Partners systematically destroyed girls' engagement with strong social support networks at home and school, which, in turn, decreased girls' ability and motivation to perform academically.

In general, out of all stressors or tasks related to the abusive relationship that girls dealt with, adolescents reported that interpersonal relationships and negotiating the school environment was the most stressful.[11] Most participants used multiple and varied coping strategies during and after the abusive relationship, and how they attempted to cope directly influenced the ultimate abuse consequences. In line with adolescent coping literature, those participants who were able to identify multiple strategies, whether healthy or unhealthy, seemed to function at a higher level in their relationships and at school than those who identified no coping strategies or only one type. All girls stopped attending extracurricular school and work activities. Cessation of these activities seriously impaired girls' ability to gain new experiences and training, benefit from social support, and earn money. Several girls also transferred schools to escape abusive partners. Although a school transfer may seem like the best idea, girls shared with us that some of their credits did not transfer to the new schools, and they were held back academically to repeat some classes. Most girls shared that they did not feel safe at school because abusive partners knew how to use the school context to enact further abuse and to alienate girls from school personnel and peers.

Girls shared several examples of how the actions of school personnel and family members were helpful and hurtful. Some girls reported that school personnel grew frustrated with their declining academic performance and attempted to address the situation in different ways. Some girls grew closer to their teachers because the teachers expressed care and concern while other girls reported growing more distant from their teachers after teachers expressed disappointment and frustration with the girls. In all of the girls' stories, however, no teacher asked directly about whether girls might be experiencing abuse. Teachers' hesitancy to ask about abuse, however, is not surprising given the lack of training and support that many teachers receive on asking about and reporting abuse.

> "I had a couple of teachers pull me aside sometimes, you know, trying to get me to tell them what was wrong, what was going on. The security people at my high school would actually see him up in my face and they'd have to break us up and they'd send him to class and send me to the counselor or my vice principal." — Sara*

The effects of dating violence on girls' future vocational orientation also were devastating. Many girls described themselves as "damaged goods" and expressed feeling unworthy of healthier relationships and not knowing how to build a "better life" without support. Julie's comment illustrates the juxtaposition between her desire to pursue specific vocational goals and serve as a strong role model for her children, and the family and community reality in which she was living.

> "I want my child to grow up and be a strong independent woman… If I keep on going how I am, I am not going to be able to be that mother to show her the way to go… I need to look at reality, you know…. My dream is to be a nurse, but reality is, I am just going to be a stripper."— Julie*

Girls with a family member or peer who supported them shared that healing emotionally from dating violence was a long journey, even with the best support.

With greater attention to how dating violence impacts girls' development, scholars will be better able to enhance girls' access to educational, work, and economic opportunities and strengthen girls' ability to live their lives free from violence long-term. ■

* All names have been changed to protect identities.

Notes
1. Bureau of Justice Statistics (2003).
2. Heise, Raikes, Watts, & Zwi, 1994; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2003; Walker, 1999.
3. Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999; Plichta, 1996; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a.
4. Benson & Fox, 2004a, 2004b.
5. Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Capaldi, et al., 2001; Kim & Capaldi, 2004.
6. e.g., Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003; Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, O'Leary, & Smith-Slep, 1999; Jouriles, McDonald, Garrido, et al., 2005; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001.
7. Arnett, 2006; Dishion, Nelson, & Kavanagh, 2003.
8. Arnett, 2006; Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, et al., 2003.
9. Center for Disease Control and Prevention; Eaton, Davis, Barrios, Brener, & Noonan, 2007; Halpern, Young, Waller, Martin, & Kupper, 2004; Roberts & Klein, 2003.
10. Chronister, Marsiglio, Linville, & Lantrip, 2011.
11. Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008; Donaldson et. al., 2000; Williamson et. al., 2003.

Local Community Resources for Young Women Experiencing Partner Violence

Ophelia's Place
http://www.opheliasplace.net/

Womenspace
http://www.womenspaceinc.org/

Looking Glass Counseling Services
http://www.lookingglass.us/