

**Justice for Girls  
Battered Women's Support Services Panel Presentation  
January 26, 2018**

**Presentation Contributors: Malia Terry, Idalia Morrissette, Savannah Norman, Sadea Johnston, Tracey McIntosh and 51 young women and teenage girls in Vancouver, B.C. who have a passionate resolve to achieve equality and justice in the lives of all girls.**

**Presented by Justice for Girls Interns:  
Malia Terry, Idalia Morrissette, Savannah Norman, Sadea Johnston**

We want to thank Battered Women's Support Services for allowing us the opportunity to speak today.

We also want to acknowledge the tragic deaths of Aubrey and Chloe. Our hearts go out to their mother, family and community.

Justice for Girls is a feminist nonprofit organization in Vancouver founded in 1999 on a vision of freedom from violence and equality in the lives of teenage girls who live in poverty and the belief that young women who live or have lived in poverty must define the solutions to the issues impacting their lives.

We were asked to speak today to shine a light on girls and teenage girls' experiences of male violence in the home, particularly looking at how domestic violence impacts those girls who live in poverty.

We will bring the voices of young women and teenage girls who Justice for Girls has learned from, and worked with and beside for the past 19 years. In particular, we hope to honor the 51 young women who worked with us during community consultations last year in Vancouver and who courageously offered their first-hand expertise to expand our understanding of the current realities and institutional barriers that teenage girls in poverty face daily.

We also hope to shed light on how systemic failures in response to violence in the lives of girls in poverty can co-create the conditions which lead to future violence and exploitation.

**Girls and young women who experience domestic male violence live in constant fear and isolation:**

– Fear - fear of being next, fear of others finding out, fear of the verbal, emotional or physical violence, and fear that if you step out of line, 'you will be shot down'

-Isolation - you don't invite friends over or aren't allowed to have friends over; you tend to move a lot and so often girls don't have a lot of close friends; you are silenced

**There is a significant emotional, mental and physical toll on girls and teenage girls who live in a home where girls experience male violence or the threat of violence:**

- Girls described challenges with sleeping, focus and concentration, anxiety, depression, nightmares, disassociation, flashbacks, hopelessness and despair and coping with cutting, disordered eating and other forms of self-harm, including drug and alcohol abuse
- All normal responses to an abnormal situation

**Young women told us:**

There was "mental and physical abuse at home and it was too much to go to school all the time, I missed a lot, but did graduate"

- One young woman described "many types of abuse and neglect. My escape was to go to school, it was better than being at home"
- Others described experiencing mental and physical abuse, fear and violence at home

**For girls, the systemic failures in response to violence often starts in school:**

**Inadequate or inappropriate response:**

- Girls explained that counselors did not take them seriously or were no help, that they seemed untrained; that they lacked sensitivity towards mental health issues.
- One young woman said she had 4 other friends also say that
- Teachers were described as not understanding at all, making dumb comments, and getting too personal
- One girl explained how they "expected you to leave personal / home life out of school" but then had unreasonable expectations of students
- One young woman said, "Teachers don't ask the tough questions because they are too afraid to get involved or don't have the proper training. So more often than not, they ignore stuff."
- Difficulty with male authority so not attending certain classes
- One young woman explained, "The first time I had a panic attack was because of a teacher yelling. I was 12 or 13."
- Another described, "People did notice in my first year at high school. They'd see me in the hallways crying."

**Misdiagnosed learning challenges:**

- Girls described being put in special ed. classes, and labeled with learning disabilities.
- One young woman explained, "I was put into a special ed class because I couldn't read, they thought I was dyslexic, but my abusive step father was the one teaching me to read at home."
- Disciplined for 're'acting out – not believed, lack of credibility so kicked out, sent to alternative programs; Getting labeled a "problem child"

### **These failures are evident in the Health Systems as well:**

-Girls may be referred to mental health services who may not have specific training in responding to violence against girls, may pathologize young women's responses, and where girls described a "revolving door" of mental health professionals.

### **Misdiagnosed with mental health illness:**

– young women described being labeled with a mental health illness and then medicated on anti-depressants, sleeping pills, anti-psychotic medication, adhd medication, and /or tranquilizers when they were girls

-One young woman described "hearing voices" when she was prescribed anti-psychotic medication at a young age.

-Another said she felt like she "was smoking crack. It gave me such bad anxiety and I was grinding my teeth and couldn't eat"

-Young women empathized that "taking medication for a problem that isn't there creates a problem that wasn't there" and another said, "you can't go off it because you don't know how to cope with feelings".

### **Inadequate or ill-equipped health and wellness supports**

-One young woman described having three different mental health counselors in one year.

-They also indicated that more often than not, mental health workers and counselors were not helpful in response to their experiences of violence.

-More focus is given to what can be done to 'fix' or 'adjust' the teenage girl and her behavior than on changing the social and economic that lead to health and wellness concerns.

### **MCFD Response**

-When girls attempt to escape male violence within the family home, government authorities such as police and child welfare often send girls back into their family homes where the abuser remains or remove girls from their family homes/communities to be placed in unsafe and/or inadequate government homes/youth shelters, but rarely remove the abusive adult male from the family home or pursue criminal prosecution against him.

-Girls are moved through many inappropriate institutional environments, co-educational group homes and foster homes.

-One teenage girls expressed, "I didn't say anything because I would have been put in the foster care system."

-Every young woman who participated in our consultations last year had had negative experiences with the service provided by MCFD. Girls described:

- A lack of consistency; constantly being assigned new workers
- being invalidated: not taken seriously
- Breaches in confidentiality

- Workers are constantly judgmental of youth; young mothers, those with addictions etc.

**Young mothers in poverty, particularly those who themselves are in care live with an overwhelming fear of having their baby taken away.**

- A young mother explained, “it is assumed that I am going to be a terrible mother because I’m in the system. We’re not bad mothers, we’re just in unfortunate situations.”
- Another said, “before I was out of the hospital, they sent a social worker in to see me. I thought for sure I was going to lose my baby.”
- Mothers and their children are at an increased risk of violence if they are less likely to reach out for help if they believe they will have their child taken away.

**Poverty is both a cause and an outcome of domestic male violence**

- 1 in 5 girls are living in poverty. 2 in 5 aboriginal girls are living in poverty.

**Impacts and implications for teenage girls:**

- many young women and they have said that they will often have to watch their younger siblings or they will have to take them to school which will often make them late for school. Many young women described not having the resources or the time to do their homework. Many young women didn’t have the funds for school fees, (ex. art supplies, workbooks, textbooks, school supplies, and field trips) and some got teased by their peers.
- A young women described getting the photocopied version of the workbook, because she couldn’t afford to buy a workbook so “everyone knew she was poor”
- Teachers will often ask students daily in front of their peers for money for school fees, supplies, fieldtrips, etc. which for a lot of young women is very embarrassing
- Young women also described that they would often go to school hungry, because they did not have any food at home. Young women also stated that they did not have very nutritious meals at home.

**Homelessness - Not wanting to come home is common reaction to violence at home for teenage girls.**

- Young women and teenage girls told us that domestic male violence, particularly sexual abuse at home, is one of the most significant reasons they become housing insecure or homeless.
- Girls described couch surfing, sleeping on the street, accessing shelters and staying with older men.
- Most girls become homeless before the age of 14.
- Indigenous girls account for close to 50% of homeless youth and girls in Vancouver.
- Girls repeatedly emphasized the lack of young women-only shelters as a barrier to safe housing.
- JFG asked young women what they do when they can’t get into a shelter and they described “limited options” when they couldn’t access a safe shelter including “walking up and down

streets” all night or “getting stuck in SRO’s” (single room occupancy rooms) and being unable to shower or change.

-A young woman told us that “I heard a guy urinated on a girls’ face while she was sleeping outside.”

-girls described being blocked from shelters if their personal identification had been stolen or lost while living on the streets

-landlords “judged” young women for leaving home at a young age, and refused housing if they could not provide references

-landlords expected sex in exchange for shelter. One young woman explained “At 14, the only people who would rent to me were people who wanted to have sex with me. Often, that is what happens.”

- JFG attended an MCFD presentation about youth agreements in which a social worker explained that a youth agreement could be terminated if a “young woman is unwilling to keep herself safe.” Young women are at an increased risk of homelessness, violence and exploitation when they are taken off youth agreements, denied access to funds, or put in institutionalized group homes and co-ed shelters where girls may not feel or be safe.

It’s not enough to talk about preventing the next tragedy from happening. There are tragedies happening now that we can and must address. Girls suffer in fear and silence. Girls’ struggle with overwhelming health challenges. Girls cope daily with the isolation of being taken from their mothers, families, communities and culture. Girls as young as 11 are leaving school, their home, and community only to end up vulnerable to exploitation and violence at the hands of older men.

We must change from a ‘social services’ to a ‘social justice’ response to girls and teenage girls’ experience of violence by addressing the social and economic conditions of inequality that maintain and increase girls’ vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

-Address poverty in the lives of women, teenage girls and their children. Women need an adequate income and secure, stable housing to sustain and protect their children.

-Fund Women’s and Indigenous Women’s organizations, shelters and transition houses so that women can escape violence and be supported to rebuild their lives.

-Increase girl-only emergency shelters, transition houses and housing for teenage girls, young women and their children.

-Stop removing children from their home in response to abuse and instead remove the abuser and support mothers to support their children.