

**THE MARGINALISATION OF YOUNG WOMEN**

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**Paper delivered at the Youth Employment Service State Conference  
August 1993**

Any discussion about the marginalisation of young women must begin by recognising the difficulties in approaching this subject in a restricted time frame, given that the issues that surround it are so complex. The processes that maintain young women in marginalised positions, their experiences and any strategies or suggestions for change are all highly complex and difficult issues to inform ourselves about. These issues are so firmly a part of our lives and our taken for granted assumptions and beliefs that understanding them and then challenging and changing them, are very difficult processes.

However, my purpose this morning is to attempt to introduce these issues generally, in the hope that you will have the incentive to further develop your own understandings and to explore the relevance of this perspective for your work.

I will do this by exploring on 4 main points:

- \* the importance of focusing on young women and their experiences;
- \* locating young women's issues in wider notions of the women's movement and the position of women in society generally;
- \* the experiences and issues facing the sort of young women I expect your service works with;
- \* looking at some of the actions / strategies we can incorporate in our work, (i.e. how can we develop a gender perspective in our work).

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF FOCUSING ON YOUNG WOMEN AND THEIR EXPERIENCES.**

Until very recently, it was rare for any attention to be focused on young women or the issues that faced them. Whilst it is not necessarily accurate to claim that young women are ignored, it is the case that the issues and needs that uniquely confront young women, as distinct from young men, go largely unnoticed. This appears to be reflective of the lack of awareness generally about the nature of women's experiences in our society.

Yet the reality of our society is that all young people are not alike and do not experience either the same issues or even the identical issue in the same way. I am not talking about the obvious individual differences that characterise us all - clearly you and I will have different experiences and we will experience similar things in different ways, just because we are different people. But I am referring here to the fact that people experience different issues based on their gender, class and race.

In relation to young women, Chesney-Lind and Sheldon make the point:

"Girls and boys do not inhabit the same worlds, and they do not have the same choices. This is not to say that girls do not share some problems with boys (notably the burdens of class and race), but even the manner in which these attributes affect the daily lives of young people is heavily mediated by gender." (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1992:4)

The reality is that young women's experiences and stories have been ignored and we have taken young men's experiences and universalised them to include all young people.

The cost of this is that when we come to develop programs or policies or strategies for working with young people, we tend to be more influenced by the young men's experiences and see these as the dominant ones that also apply to young women. Often though, this is not the case.

A good example of this is the recent introduction of the YACCA program. YACCA aims to develop a community response to juvenile offending. Significant resources have gone into the development and operation of this program, however, there has been little recognition of the gender bias in this program. Juvenile offending is much less of an issue for young women who offend significantly less than young men and their offences are usually of a very different nature. But there is no recognition that programs such as these have been developed based on the issues and needs of young men which are then seen to be the needs of all young people. This is indicative of a lack of attention to gender issues. It is significant that few, if any of the issues that impact on young women are addressed in similar government initiatives.

Some of the issues uniquely facing young women will hopefully become clearer as we progress this morning.

## **LOCATING YOUNG WOMEN'S ISSUES IN WIDER NOTIONS OF WOMEN'S POSITION IN SOCIETY.**

It is undeniable that women do experience injustice, discrimination and inequality in this society just because they are women. (This is also true of other social groups, such as Aboriginal and Islander people and people from non-English speaking backgrounds, etc.) Let's just focus on this for a moment. I want to ensure that we are left with no doubt that women experience serious inequality in this society simply because they are women.

Women have historically been excluded from the major public institutions in our society. Educational opportunities and employment prospects have all been limited by gender discrimination.

For example, it was not that long ago that physicians advocated that once women began to menstruate they should take extreme care and not divert much needed energy from their reproductive abilities. There was concern that should this occur "women's uteruses and ovaries would shrivel and the human race would die out." (Hubbard, 1983:4-5) Of course, these claims totally neglected the experiences and lives of poor and black women who performed physically demanding work for long hours and were then accused of reproducing too much!

Whilst significant reforms have undeniably been made, giving women a far greater sense of equality and opportunity than previously, it is important that we recognise that women are still excluded from many aspects of life that are considered the appropriate domain of men.

For example, in 1989 men made up 96% of US Congress, 97% of superior court judges in Britain, 95% of federal court judges in Australia, 93% of the Australian military and 94% of Australian police. (Franzway et al, 1989:7) Similarly, figures from the ABS in 1983 suggested that all but 2% of young women apprentices are hairdressers; 41% of women professionals are nurses and 36% are teachers. (Quixley, 1992:29) Whilst one would hope that these figures will have changed over the past ten years, it seems unlikely that there has been significant change.

What concerns me about this information is not only the actual facts and figures but the attitude that underlies these incidents. Whilst discrimination in employment for example, may be lessening because of anti-discrimination legislation etc., I remain unconvinced that this change is indicative of a general community shift in attitudes to women simply because there seems such persuasive evidence that what has changed is not so much the nature of attitudes to women but the ways in which this is expressed. Violence against women is probably the starkest and most horrifying example of this.

Consider the following statistics:

\* 1 in 5 women presenting at the Royal Brisbane Hospital have a history of domestic violence. (University of Queensland Report cited Courier-Mail 18th Feb 92; cited in Shattering the Silence 4:4, 1991);

\* in the USA a woman is beaten every 15 seconds. (U.S. Dept of Justice - cited LWGS; cited in Shattering the Silence 4:4, 1991);

\* in Mexico a woman is raped every 9 minutes. (Doble Joranda, Nov 1987 - cited LWGS; cited in Shattering the Silence 4:4, 1991);

\* in the USA over the past 10 years the incidence of rape has increased 4 times faster than the total crime rate. (WIN 1991 17:3, 43; cited in Shattering the Silence 4:4, 1991);

\* women and girls compose 90% of the 8 million people in the US with anorexia and bulimia. (cited LWGS; cited in Shattering the Silence 4:4, 1991);

\* between 3-6% of people with anorexia die of the illness. (cited LWGS; cited in Shattering the Silence 4:4, 1991);

\* more than 100 million women and girls are victims of genital mutilation. (WHO Report, cited WIN 1991 17:3, 31; cited in Shattering the Silence 4:4, 1991);

\* of 8000 abortions at a Bombay clinic between 1978-1982, 7800 female foetuses were aborted after sex determination tests. (cited LWGS; cited in Shattering the Silence 4:4, 1991);

\* if girls were valued and given the same care as boys there would be at least another 100 million women in the world. (New Internationalist Collective, 1993)

We have no choice but to accept these statistics and when we do it becomes impossible to see this as an individual issue, as a problem that each individual woman has contributed to or caused in some way. It is clearly something much bigger than that. It is also impossible, I think, to see it as anything other than an expression of male power, it is not about right and wrong or nagging or financial worries or stress at work - it is about gender and power.

I think that interpreting women's experience in this sense is one of the greatest contributions of the women's movement. The experiences of so many women that were previously individualised have been recognised as shared and as issues and problems that have their roots in the type of social system that we have rather than in the dysfunctional lives of a select group of women.

This is a very important point - I believe these issues are part of a larger social structural process. The sorts of issues we are talking about here do not just simply occur by accident. Either we accept that these issues are part of a social process or our only other choice is to suggest that in fact, women are inferior to men and our social structures and processes operate accordingly. Whilst this is clearly not the view that I would advocate you subscribe to, it is a forceful one and one that requires rebuff.

Thousands of research dollars are still spent every year in an attempt by male scientists to demonstrate a genetic inferiority in women. This tradition has moved from the craniologists who attempted to prove that women's brains (and black people's) were smaller and therefore they were less intelligent and less deserving of education through to the sociobiologists of the 70's who believed that the hormonal imbalance that women allegedly experience meant they were unsuited for occupations that required consistency and responsibility. (Faust, 1991)

In relation to the debate about the appropriateness of woman as bank managers, in 1970 Edgar Berman, a physician said that "You would not want the president of your bank making a loan under the raging hormonal influence of that particular period." (Edgar Berman, New York Times, 26 July 1970) Similarly, women were unable to become airline pilots until very recently because of this perceived hormonal instability.

There are numerous examples of the inconsistencies in this argument about the natural inferiority of women in relation to men. It is important that we develop some sort of recognition that these arguments have been used to justify practices that have resulted in the discrimination and subordination of women over time.

So how can we understand the continued marginalisation of women in this society?

Whilst this is a complex question and we are limited at the depth to which we can probe, let me suggest to you that our sexist practices and processes and assumptions and beliefs are so deeply ingrained in our lives and our society that we have come to accept them as normal and can not really imagine our society in any other way.

In relation to this Suzie Quixley says that:

"In the case of sexism, the dominant culture at this time may not have even considered the need to promote their ideology at all ... the structures and assumptions that underlie the oppression of women have been in place for thousands of years. The oppression of women is so deeply institutionalised, legitimised and perpetuated within this society that it occurs without the need for any conscious consideration or effort. It is "normal". Both women and men continually act out "their" role as a matter of "ordinary" life interaction. Frequently, **neither** is aware of the fact that they are operating on the basis of **assumptions, expectations** and **norms** which cannot be demonstrated to be correct." (1992:29)

Let's leave this present discussion with the acknowledgment that women in our society (and most others) are treated differently than men and in a way that forces their subordination and inequality.

## ISSUES FACING YOUNG WOMEN

Let's move on to talk specifically about young women and to look at some of the specific ways in which young women are marginalised in our society. There are several issues that stand out as being highly significant in the lives of young women and most of these tend to involve notions of sexual violence - for example, sexual assault, incest, date rape,

### Sexual assault

Sexual assault is a massive issue for young women. Most young women are clearly able to identify their concerns and fears about sexual violence.

How does sexual violence (as experienced or feared) impact on a young women's employment prospects though?

In the first instance the fear of sexual assault is a real restriction on her independence and therefore issues about transport to and from work, hours of work, etc., all become extremely important. And with good reason. Women are more likely to be assaulted from 15 -24 years than any other time in their lives. (Women's Policy Unit, Crime Victims Survey, 1991)

\* 84% of single women who were assaulted in the last 12 months were between 15-24 years (Women's Policy Unit, Crime Victims Survey, 1991);

\* within the last 12 months 1 in 10 women between the ages of 20-24 experienced a threat of violence (Women's Policy Unit, Crime Victims Survey, 1991);

\* 27% of young women experienced some form of verbal abuse in the last 12 months (Women's Policy Unit, Crime Victims Survey, 1991);

\* 23% of women in the 15-19 age group thought that they would be attacked and robbed in the next 12 months (Women's Policy Unit, Crime Victims Survey, 1991).

### **Incest**

Incest is probably the most widely recognised issue confronting so many young women. The statistics are horrifying:

\* by the age of 18 years 1 in 3 or 4 girls will have experienced some form of sexual assault;

\* for 2 out of 3 children who are sexually abused the abuse occurred more than once;

\* for 30% of these children the abuse continued for more than 1 year;

\* 89% of children who are sexually abused know the man who violates them (this has huge implications for young women to develop trust with men).

The effect of sexual abuse on the lives of young women is huge and destructive and damaging. It affects their ability to trust and to freely express their emotions and sexuality. Given that most young women do not discuss their abusive experiences, it remains a burden that they carry around with them and that affects every part of their lives in some way.

In terms of employment, young women who have been sexually abused will often be fearful or defiant of people in authority, and most importantly incest survivors typically find it incredibly difficult to develop open and trusting relationships with men, given that some of the most trusted male figures in their lives have subjected them to horrendous abuse. Many of the young women you are currently working with will have been abused or sexually assaulted in some way.

### **Date rape**

The incidence of date rape is only just recently being acknowledged.

Whilst it has been a feature of young women's experiences for a long time, socially, we are only just beginning to recognise the magnitude of this problem.

Some of the most disturbing findings come from a study conducted by the DVRC (Domestic Violence Resource Centre) and they confirm that date rape is a reality for many young women. A questionnaire administered by DVRC to 187 fourteen year old boys found that one in three thought that it was "okay for a boy to hold a girl down and force her to have sexual intercourse" if they felt she had "led him on". A further 19% stated that they were uncertain. 15% agreed forced sex was okay if the couple had dated a long time and another 15% said they were unsure. (D.V.R.C. Fact Sheet, 1992)

Again in relation to employment, the sheer trauma of such attacks leave women feeling ashamed, abused, disgusting and often unable to function in ways that are conducive to work environments. One of the other crucial aspects of date rape is that because socially we are unwilling to validate women's experiences of any form of sexual assault, women are particularly apprehensive to disclose their experience. So often you or the employer would simply not know the reason for the young woman's distress. This situation would be exacerbated even further should the perpetrator be a work colleague.

## **Domestic violence**

Many young women currently live in or have lived in abusive family environments. Most commonly there is violence in their parents relationships (often between mother and step-father), and also violence (particularly verbal violence but often physical violence as well) between parents and the young women.

Statistics from the Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force Report in 1988, suggest that children were present in 88% of violent households and abused by the violent partner in 68% of these households. (D.V.R.C. Fact Sheet, 1992)

Observing violent relationships between their parents and the effects of this on their mothers has a significant effect on the young women's views and feelings about their relationships with men.

In terms of developing this picture of the issues facing young women you work with, I recognise that your particular service has a very specific focus on employment issues and that as such it is not a welfare service. However, it is also important to recognise that the forces that impact on young women (and therefore on their ability to obtain and maintain employment) come from a variety of areas. It also seems to me that our most effective interventions are those that are informed by a comprehensive picture of young people's experiences and lives. I'm sure that all of you live with the constant tension that comes from needing to separate out different parts of young people's lives - unfortunately my encouragement to instead hold these aspects together will not be enough when faced with demands of your organisation and your time and resources.

## **HOW TO INCORPORATE A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN OUR WORK.**

Incorporating a gender perspective in our work is crucially important. Unfortunately this is not an issue that is easily addressed. There is not a set of specific behaviours that we can all subscribe to and be assured that we will no longer perpetuate gender inequality. Having a commitment to eliminating gender inequality necessitates a radical overhaul of our work practices and requires that we develop ways of working that attempt to move past this.

The primary thing that I can suggest to you is that incorporating a perspective such as this into our work is crucial if as a society we are to begin to validate young women's voices.

We must listen to young women and listen with the intention to affirm not dismiss.

- \* this means encouraging young women and believing them if they recount experiences of sexual harassment or violence (more than likely they are telling the truth);

- \* validate their experiences by recognising the ways in which these other issues effect their employment.

We must include young women and talk to them about their experiences.

We must not compare their experiences or emotions with "the male norm".

- \* ask what are the issues for young women as distinct from young men and then ask how well we as a service respond to them;

\* don't automatically think that because something is an issue for most of the young men you see that it is an issue for young people.

We must challenge our practice and the socially prescribed roles we hold for young women that relate more to their gender than their ability or interest.

\* check how often you sit down with a young woman and offer her the same employment choices as the young men - whilst you may offer young men different choices to young women too, the closer you look the more you will probably find that young men's choices are both more highly paid and prestigious;

\* how many of you have seriously discussed the possibility of one of your young women clients becoming a butcher or an electrical engineer.

We must encourage young women to push past the barriers set up in this society to limit and restrict their participation and involvement.

We must challenge our own prejudiced views of others - not only by sex but by race and class and sexuality and age and ability - and we must encourage others around us to do the same.

We must establish links between individual young people's experiences.

\* when the majority of young women you see have huge self esteem issues and yet few of the young men do, this is probably a good sign that these issues are issues for young women generally.

I am not advocating that you counsel young women (because it may not be appropriate for your service or you personally in terms of skills etc) but rather that you become sensitive to these issues and familiarise yourself with the resources in the community.

Clearly, these issues facing young women are substantial ones. Our attempts to incorporate a gender perspective or awareness into our work is the challenge that is before us all. What I've tried to do this morning is to give you a brief and relatively basic look at what I think are some of the critical issues that confront us as workers with young women. I hope, at the very least, you have gained some greater appreciation of the lives and experiences of these young women. At the most, I hope that you feel somewhat inspired to continue learning and challenging your work in this area.



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