

| 01/04/2003 | 873 words

## US Teens Fight Date Violence With Girl Power

By Sharron Mendel

WASHINGTON DC (PANOS) – Dating is a rite of passage for US teenagers where they learn and rehearse positive values about relationships, fidelity, sexuality and love. It can be exhilarating, embarrassing, scary, rapturous – or all of the above.

But for a significant minority of adolescent girls, dating can be a battle ground where male partners sexually assault, rape, beat, threaten or emotionally abuse them.

Researchers call it dating violence. But because studies and surveys have used different definitions of dating violence – and because the vast majority of incidents go unreported – its true prevalence is not known.

Previous estimates of physical and sexual dating violence among US high school students range from 10 to 25%. According to a 1999 survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 11 high school students reported being hit, slapped or physically hurt – usually by a boyfriend. One in 11 female students also said they had been forced to have sex. Over half of women who reported they had sex before the age of 15 said it was involuntary, according to the New York-based Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), a non-governmental organisation providing sexual and reproductive health research and analysis.

The 1998 US Department of Justice National Violence Against Women Survey found that 54% of rape victims questioned were under 18 years old when they experienced their first rape – and most knew their attacker.

Coerced or forced sex is almost always unprotected sex. For young women its consequences include unwanted pregnancy and the possible end to their formal education. It can also result in a sexually transmitted infection – in a single act of unprotected sex with an infected partner, a teenage girl has a 30% risk of acquiring genital herpes, a 50% chance of contracting gonorrhoea and a 1% chance of HIV infection, says the AGI.

Adolescent girls who experience dating violence often feel powerless, worthless and unable to refuse unwanted sexual advances. They are also at risk of a multitude of other serious health problems, including alcohol, tobacco and drug misuse, besides first intercourse before the age of 15 and considered or attempted suicide. It's a grim picture but – fortunately – it's an incomplete one.

For Washington is also home to organisations such as GirlSpeak and DC Self-Defence which have empowered over a thousand teenage girls of all backgrounds and races, helping them prevent, avoid and – if necessary – physically end attacks.

Trainer Lauren Taylor, a founder of DC's first women's shelter and a campaigner for 25 years against gender violence, defines self-defence as 'anything you do to keep yourself safe (listen-

ing to your instincts and picking your friends wisely), to interrupt abuse or assault or to take care of yourself and recover from violence or trauma.'

Whether Taylor's students are 'teens in trouble', such as the homeless or those within the juvenile justice system, or young women in elite private schools, she first dispels myths about 'stranger danger' and helps girls focus on where real dangers lie.

'Teens are terrified of something happening to them at gunpoint,' Taylor explains. Such a situation is actually unlikely, 'but it is very likely a boy will stick his hand up a girl's skirt at school, or that someone she is dating will push her to go further sexually than she is ready for.'

With this new awareness, the next step is practicing assertiveness, usually through verbal limit-setting, so girls can interrupt a situation before it becomes physically threatening.

'In order to say no, you need to know what you want and how you feel – and that is incredibly hard for teenagers – let alone adults,' Taylor says.

Finally, girls learn self-defence techniques so they can protect themselves in an actual attack situation. Learning these techniques bring further benefits, Taylor says: 'Where people connect with their personal power, it is much more likely that they will use non-physical strategies – 'I don't like that and I want you to stop doing it!'

A former Taylor student headed off an unwanted situation with a male friend whose behaviour at a party 'was way out of line. He was groping me. I sat him down, looked him in the eye and said 'stop it right now'. He was stunned.'

Adds another: 'So many young women focus on being polite. It's OK to be rude... for the sake of your own safety.'

Concerned parents can see the difference. According to Donna Lopes, whose daughter attended GirlSpeak's self-defence classes, the experience gives girls 'validation for not buying into stereotypical images [passivity, compliance] of women.'

The individual transformations of young women who attend Taylor's DC classes – and classes like hers across the country – positively affect communities, Taylor believes. Self-defence graduates raise daughters who are assertive and sons who respect women's rights. They in turn are more likely to become advocates and campaigners for good laws and services affecting women.

Taylor and other campaigners remain committed to multiple strategies, such as legal reforms and public education efforts, to combat gender violence. 'I believe that we will, in the long-term, change attitudes and behaviours,' she says.

'But one of the reasons I love self-defence as a strategy for ending violence against women is that it's so productive and immediate,' Taylor enthuses. 'Unlike legislative change or funding a shelter, you get instant results.'

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