CYBERVIOLENCE DIRECTED AT GIRLS AND WOMEN: A CONVERSATION ABOUT STRATEGY, POLICY AND RESPONSES WITH SOCIAL SERVICE CEGEP STUDENTS

GENDER-BASED CYBERVIOLENCE STRATEGY DESCRIPTION

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PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document describes one of the strategies used by the Atwater Library and Computer Centre's project, *Preventing and Eliminating Cyberviolence Against Young Women and Girls,* funded by Status of Women Canada (April 2014-April 2017). In making this strategy document publicly available, we hope to offer other organisations and communities a tool that can be adapted and used in order to develop definitions of and policies around gender-based cyberviolence. In establishing clear definitions and policies, we believe that organisations and communities will be better equipped to understand, prevent, respond to and eliminate gendered cyberviolence in their respective settings.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Atwater Library and Computer Centre's *Preventing and Eliminating Cyberviolence Against Young Women and Girls* project was a 3-year project funded by Status of Women Canada. The project sought to develop strategies, in collaboration with stakeholders, that would mobilize participants to work towards the goal of preventing cyberviolence directed at girls, women, LGBTQQI2S[1], and gender non-conforming people. The strategy to develop definitions, policy solutions and responses to prevent and eliminate gender-based cyberviolence emerged directly from the needs assessment we conducted during the first year of the project. Stakeholders overwhelming articulated that there was a need to 'name cyberviolence' through defining cyberviolence. Without clear definitions, there was no way for people who were experiencing cyberviolence to point to a definition and seek help.

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[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Two-Spirit

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CONTEXT

On October 27th, 2016, a group of 16 Social Service CEGEP students participated in a 3-hour scenario based activity at the Atwater Library. The focus group sought to stimulate reflection around the issue of online violence, and to explore strategies that could potentially address this phenomenon. The students ranged in age from 17 years old to the mid-30s.

The participants were divided into 3 groups. Each group was assigned to one of three brainstorming stations, each representing a different level of intervention when addressing cyberviolence:

1. **Individual:** How to support individuals, specifically youth, who are experiencing cyberviolence.
2. **Collective**: How to address the practice of cyberviolence when it has become an integrated part of a specific space (e.g. classroom) or group of people.
3. **Systemic:** How to develop systemic strategies to address cyberviolence.

One member from each group facilitated a 30-minute brainstorm session at their respective station. Once the 30 minutes were up, the groups rotated to begin a new brainstorm session at a different station. Groups had the option of having a different person facilitate the subsequent brainstorms; this was repeated until all the groups had the chance to brainstorm strategies for each level of intervention.

Following the brainstorm, everyone came back together to discuss the ideas generated through the process, which also served as an opportunity for participants to share their own stories related to cyberviolence.

LEVELS OF INTERVENTION

Below are the 3 levels of intervention that the participants brainstormed on, including a list of questions participants considered for each level.

➔ **Individual level:** This level of intervention involves providing direct, active individual support to students experiencing, witnessing, and/or perpetrating cyberviolence.

- ◆ If you experienced cyberviolence as a student, what would you do?
- ◆ What kind of individual support do you think would be helpful?
- ◆ What may the potential consequences of these strategies be for the individual?
- ◆ What can an individual who witnesses cyberviolence do?
- ◆ What words of encouragement and/or support would you share with someone who has experienced cyberviolence?
- ◆ How would you support youth to stop engaging in forms of cyberviolence?

➔ **Collective level:** This level of intervention involves providing direct, active support to teachers and students. Cyberviolence, in many cases, has become embedded in the social fabric of many classrooms. This level of intervention aims to support teachers in addressing the culture of cyberviolence in their classrooms.

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- ◆ What are effective ways to address cyberviolence that has become part of everyday classroom culture?
- ◆ What activities and/or discussions can a teacher introduce to prevent and eliminate cyberviolence in their classrooms?
- ◆ Who can a teacher seek support from or collaborate with in implementing these measures?
- ◆ In what ways can these efforts be met with resistance? What would a teacher need to do in order to overcome this resistance?

➔ **Systemic level:** This level of intervention involves developing specific strategies that would contribute to nurturing an alternative online culture that is free from violence. This level of intervention aims to support administrators and other people in positions of power in enacting far-reaching, transformative policies, programs, and changes to institutional structures and cultures.

- ◆ What about current educational structures and cultures needed to be changed in order to foster an alternative online culture?
- ◆ What policies and programs can be developed and implemented systemically to achieve this?
- ◆ Who can administrators collaborate with and how?

FINDINGS

This section provides a synthesis of the main strategies the participants proposed when considering how to address cyberviolence. The participants' verbatim responses are included as an appendix at the end of this document.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL OF INTERVENTION

All groups described a range of emotions someone targeted by cyberviolence would likely experience, including sadness, helplessness, anger, and feeling a sense of isolation and pain. Along with these emotions, groups suggested actions that an individual could take when responding to cyberviolence, such as calling the perpetrator out, seeking support from friends, siblings, teachers, parents, or other people in positions of authority, joining a support group, and accessing counselling and other social services. One group stressed that police and parents should only get involved if necessary and appropriate, and suggested there to be a resource person specifically for cyberviolence and for there to be an "open door policy". Strictly online actions included reporting and/or blocking the perpetrator.

Participants also reflected on the possible repercussions of these actions. All groups highlighted the reality that the consequences could be just as severe as the cyberviolence itself, for example:

- ◆ The person may be subjected to more instances of violence, gossip, accusations of being weak, and/or be blamed for being targeted in the first place ("victim blaming").

♦ Those seeking help may find themselves in places of support that are not actually supportive, or may not seek support altogether due to negative past experiences with experiencing cyberviolence (or a negative experience with a therapist or counsellor).

In terms of what a witness could do, participants discussed a variety of possible actions, including stopping and/or reporting the perpetrator, and supporting the person being targeted directly. All groups described the importance of playing a supportive role:

♦ Directing the victim to resources, reporting the perpetrator if the victim does not feel capable of doing so themselves, advocating for the victim, and becoming an ally and encouraging others to do the same.
♦ One group stated that witnesses could contact the person perpetrating the violence directly to inform them that what they are doing is wrong.

Other ways to support a person experiencing cyberviolence include:

♦ Reassuring them that they are not alone (i.e. normalizing the experience)
♦ Reassuring them that support is available
♦ Reassuring them that you are there for them and ready to actively listen to their story.

Participants were asked to reflect on ways to support the perpetrator. Educational strategies were discussed by most groups, including:

♦ Exploring the legal and social consequences of cyberviolence with youth
♦ Activities that foster a more intimate understanding of the victim's and the perpetrator's experiences
♦ Encouraging youth to reflect on how their peers experience cyberviolence (e.g. do they fear cyberviolence or accept it?).
♦ Validating the feelings of those involved in and affected by cyberviolence.
♦ Exploring with young people the reasons why they engage in cyberviolence in the first place, including what needs are being met.
♦ Asking young people how best to support them in reducing or altogether stopping their harmful behaviour.

Participants also highlighted the need to update current resources and workshops, and the need for social workers to be trained in how to address cyberviolence. One group stressed the reality that many youth "won't give a shit or two", especially younger youth who may "feel like they are invincible".

COLLECTIVE LEVEL OF INTERVENTION
Participants also considered ways teachers could address cyberviolence in their classrooms. All groups discussed the need to integrate anti-cyberviolence content in the curriculum, such as:

♦ Having students do a research project on cyberbullying

- ♦ Facilitating emotion-provoking and experiential activities such as the "privilege walk", role plays, analysing case scenarios, and engaging in self-reflective writing to support young people in connecting to and understanding their feelings.

One group suggested that education on cyberviolence should be:

- ♦ Treated in a similar way to sexual health and safer drug use education.

Finally, one group highlighted the need for

- ♦ Parents and teachers to become better acquainted with social media and online culture (i.e. "accept that it exists").
- ♦ Teachers could collaborate with other teachers, administrators, parents, counsellors, community organisations, student unions, and the students themselves.
- ♦ The groups also considered how teachers could overcome any resistance to these efforts.

One group stressed the importance of getting people involved in these initiatives who the youth could actually relate to. Another group simply stated that, if met with resistance, teachers just need to keep on trying and to stay committed to their goal.

SYSTEMIC LEVEL OF INTERVENTION

Educational and legal strategies were discussed across groups when considering how to address cyberviolence systemically. Groups described the need to:

- ♦ Provide ongoing support to teachers in the form of trainings, compulsory seminars, support groups, and other awareness raising activities.
- ♦ Integrating technology into the classroom (e.g. smart boards and tablets/ipads), and making online communication part of the curriculum were also suggested.
- ♦ Most groups stated that all these activities should be accessible and open to everyone involved in young people's lives including parents, and school administrators.
- ♦ Moreover, participants stressed the importance of having teachers and parents teach young people about cyberviolence as early as possible. Part of this would involve adapting educational activities with the aim of making them interactive and relevant to different age groups, realities, and shifting needs.

In terms of legal interventions, most groups pointed to the need to update current laws and policies, including Quebec's anti-bullying law, Bill C-56, which, at the moment, does not account for cyberviolence.

- ♦ Making the law clearer (i.e. "easy to follow"), more rigid, and devoid of "grey" areas were also cited as important.
- ♦ Ensuring that the law accounts for "multiple scenarios". Furthermore, one group suggested that "stronger actions and consequences" (e.g. zero tolerance) need to be taken against cyberviolence.

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- Making social- and emotion-focused support groups available to all those involved in and affected by cyberviolence (i.e. for victims, perpetrators, teachers, and parents).
- Implementing a safer, easier, and more reliable reporting process for victims by creating a "safe environment" for those seeking support, ensuring confidentiality to "protect students' identity", and eliminating stigma around the experience of cyberviolence.

DISCUSSION & LIMITATIONS

Overall, the workshop generated a variety of reflections and strategies on how to understand and address cyberviolence as experienced by young people. Many of the ideas proposed by the participants are not necessarily new (e.g. directing victims to resources, educating teachers and parents, stronger laws and policies, etc.). Nonetheless, each group identified important opportunities for intervention that warrant further exploration.

All the groups acknowledged the vital role witnesses can potentially play in situations of cyberviolence. Teaching young people how to be supportive and mindful allies would be important in fostering a culture grounded in empathy, respect, and care. This can also help in destigmatizing cyberviolence by pushing back against the shame and blame that many people experience as a result of being targeted. Nurturing young people's critical consciousness and instilling in them a sense of responsibility to their peers' wellbeing, from an early age (e.g. grade school), can be an effective way to counter cyberviolence and to undermine its legitimacy as a "normal" mode of interaction.

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES
Significantly, support services need to be actually supportive. This means that counsellors, social workers, therapist, teachers, and other professionals need to reflect on the ways that their care and services may, in fact, exacerbate the pain young people affected by cyberviolence are already experiencing. Being mindful of how power and judgement play out in the helping or therapeutic relationship is central to this end.

FEAR AS A BARRIER TO ACCESSING SERVICES
A critical outcome revealed that young people may be reluctant to access services for a variety of reasons, such as

- Fear of prejudice.
- Fear of not being believed
- Fear of being shamed
- Fear of having their feelings belittled or outright dismissed
- Fear of professionals not respecting confidentiality, etc.

Moreover, young people's willingness to seek support can be influenced by their past experiences with places of support: A past traumatic experience with a professional or other authority figure does not help in engendering trust towards professionals and authority figures in the present. Professionals need to go beyond slapping a "safer space" sticker on their doors and must engage

with young people in ways that demonstrate their commitment to actively, meaningfully and rigorously listening to and supporting them.

VICTIM VS. PERPETRATOR BINARY

"Perpetrators" of cyberviolence must be supported as well. In the same way that young boys and men need to be targeted and included in the fight against misogyny, sexism, and heterosexism, so too do perpetrators in the fight against cyberviolence. People engage in violent acts for a variety of reasons; ignoring these reasons will do little in terms of curbing and eliminating the harmful effects of cyberviolence. In this sense, there is a great need to locate a person's individual act(s) of cyberviolence in the context of a wider online (and offline) culture of violence. In fact, the focus group participants drew attention to this and highlighted the importance of understanding everyone's position and reality.

Relatedly, continuing to frame the issue in binary terms (i.e. victim versus perpetrator) may only make addressing cyberviolence that much more difficult. The labels of "victim" and "perpetrator" hold meaning and can follow the people they have been assigned to throughout much, if not all, of their lives. Labels obscure the complexity and humanness of the person it intends to describe. In so doing, a perpetrator may only be seen as "bad" or "wrong", and may face rejection, shame, guilt, and potentially even more devastating and life altering consequences (e.g. incarceration). On the other hand, a victim may be perceived as "wrong", "weak", "fragile", and "damaged". This person can just as likely experience rejection, shame, and guilt, and, if not supported in the right way, may struggle socially (e.g. isolation) and emotionally (e.g. low self-esteem and self-worth, depression, and suicidality). **Critically reflecting on how labels shape the way we view, judge, understand, and treat the people they are attached to is essential if we are to support young people in ways that enhance their wellbeing, healing, and growth.**

TEACHING METHODS AND EDUCATION MODELS

Collective and experiential forms of education seem to be another integral part of the equation. Change may be more easily achieved when knowledge is shared in a way that disrupts how people perceive themselves, their environment, and their place within it. Standard teaching methods that position the teacher as an all-knowing authority and young people as naïve, inexperienced pupils can create a rift that may be too wide to successfully transform a classroom culture. Valuing young people's diverse experiences, voices and realities, and encouraging self-expression and debate in the classroom, can play a crucial role in fostering a collective sense of trust and connection. From this place, teachers, in meaningful collaboration with students, can facilitate experiential exercises and activities that support young people in connecting more deeply with their own emotions and those of others. This can develop young people's empathy, for others, *and* themselves, and can help transform seemingly entrenched oppressive social relations, both online and offline.

In a similar vein, teachers, administrators, and other authority figures need to recognise that participating in online reality is a necessity in this day and age, especially for young people. The Internet is a social, political, and economic forum where real things do happen, and where people do get hurt, become blackmailed, exploited, and violated. Efforts to eliminate violence can

no longer only take place "in real life" (IRL). In order for violence, in all shapes and forms, to be comprehensively and meaningfully addressed, these efforts must be just as present in the ulterior real life (URL). Acknowledging this reality, and ensuring that it is effectively explored, considered, and scrutinised in the classroom, is vital.

LIMITATIONS OF THE FOCUS GROUP

CYBERVIOLENCE VS CYBERBULLYING
There were several limitations to the focus group exercise that are important to consider if a similar process is to be replicated elsewhere. The participants often spoke of "cyberbullying" rather than "cyberviolence" in their responses. Although cyberbullying is, without a doubt, a major form of cyberviolence, there are myriad other shapes that cyberviolence can take. Moreover, the objective of the focus group was to develop strategies that could be used in high schools, CEGEPs, and universities; however, many of the proposed strategies seemed have been centered on the realities of high school and grade school students, and were not all transferrable to post-secondary settings. Addressing this would simply involve ensuring that participants are clear about the objectives and purpose of the process. For example, those leading the focus group could more actively and regularly check in with participants throughout the process to ensure that each group remains, more or less, on task, and are perhaps reminded of the definition of cyberviolence throughout the workshop.

CLARITY AND INTERPRETATIONS
In addition, the meaning of and intent behind some of the participants' responses were not always easy to discern. Each group wrote out their ideas on flip chart papers, which were then collected to be analysed at a later time. As such, when the data was finally looked at, there was no way for participants to elaborate on and clarify responses that were difficult for the research team to interpret. Furthermore, many of the participants' responses were very general in nature and, at times, vague.

STRATEGIES FOR FUTURE FOCUS GROUPS
In order for future participants to develop strategies that are more concrete and specific, it may be necessary for participants to consider specific cyberviolence case scenarios. In this case, each group could be asked to analyse a unique scenario and develop strategies to respond to the situation using the three levels of intervention described above. This strategy may make the activity feel more real for participants, and would certainly incite a lot of discussion and debate in each group.

FACILITATOR TRAINING
In order to ensure that all participants feel as safe and comfortable as possible, getting skilled and experienced facilitators to support each group would be important; such additional training would allow for a more intersectional consideration of cyberviolence, and would encourage participants to reflect on how people and communities (outside of their own) are affected differently by cyberviolence, perhaps due to gender, race, ability, culture, status, sexuality, identity, religion, etc. In this sense, having participants analyse case scenarios that reflect a diversity of experiences would

lead to the development of strategies that are more tangible, context-specific, and pragmatic, while also reflect a much broader community than those from where participants come from.

EXPANDING DEFINITIONS OF SELF-IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIPS
Similar to IRL, many online forums are dominated by white, cisgender, able-bodied men. The use of selfies and other media can be a way for young people to open up space for themselves and others in their community. Young people can also use photos and messages to mobilise, resist, and push back against racism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, rape culture, slut shaming, etc. Moreover, participating in online forums can provide youth with the chance to forge connections with others and to develop important relationships in their lives; this is especially important for young people who struggle with mental health, and, for a variety of reasons, who may feel isolated and excluded from offline reality.

BALANCING SAFETY WITH OPPORTUNITY
Finally, although the focus of the exercise was to explore online forms of violence and consider strategies to address them, a conversation about the myriad benefits of online interaction needs to be had as well. Painting a solely negative and "scary" picture of online reality will do little in terms of fostering an online culture that is safer and more inclusive. Many people, especially younger people, can access a variety of opportunities online that would not otherwise be available to them offline. Young people can play around with self-definitions and try out different ways to express themselves in order to figure out what feels right for them. Furthermore, they can explore their sexuality, gender, and identity more generally.

APPENDIX

VERBATIM RESPONSES

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL: STRATEGIES & REFLECTIONS BY GROUP

Group 1 Responses
As a student experiencing cyberviolence, I would tell someone, tell no one, hide, fight back, feel helpless…
Helpful support would be from someone that is knowledgeable on the issue.
The consequences of not telling anyone or telling someone could be just as bad, the bullying could get worse.
If someone witnesses someone else being cyberbullied they should support them and be the one to tell someone else if the victim feels they can't do it themselves.
"I'm here for you."
Challenges with supporting the bully: • They won't give a shit or two • Younger youth feel like they are invincible

Group 2 Responses
If you experienced cyberviolence as a student, what would you do? • Suffer in silence • Talk to someone (teacher, parent), school social worker, talk to figure of authority • Support: therapy, counselling, support groups, psychoeducational groups close friends/siblings/parent (social system)
What may the potential consequences of these strategies be for the individual? • Confiding in friends and it backfiring (gossip, accused of weakness, victim blaming) • Turned off by therapy because of bad past experiences • Find out about ones environment not being supportive
What can an individual who witnesses cyberviolence do? • Report • Advocate • Join the bully • Create alliance with "bully"/victim
Actions/words of support/encouragement • Active listening • Tell them there is support out there and that people are also going through this • Not alone
Support youth: • Education!

Group 3
If you experienced cyberviolence as a student, what would you do? • Cry • Call them out! • Talk to an adult

• Report/block
• Hide
• Contact parents
• Talk to friends
What kind of individual support do you think would be helpful?
• Resource person for cyberviolence
• Open door policy
• Contact parents **IF APPROPRIATE**
• Support groups
• Contact police if NEED
What may the potential consequences of these strategies be for the individual?
• Sensitize/educate
• Negative punishment
• Could subject them to further acts of violence
What can an individual who witnesses cyberviolence do?
• Try to stop it
• Contact them (person doing CV) and say it's wrong
• Report it
• Support person who is experiencing CV
• "I'm here for you"
• Direct them to resources
• Encourage people to identify themselves as an ally (even if they don't know them)
How would you support youth to stop engaging in forms of cyberviolence?
• Why?! What need are you meeting by hurting others via CV
• Exploring consequences: legal and social
• Encouraging activities that promote a better understanding of both sides
• Explore how their peer group feels about their cyberviolence: fear? accepting?
• What would help you to stop/reduce the behaviour?
• Need updating of resources and workshops
• Integrate CV in training for social workers
• **Validate** – it's real

COLLECTIVE LEVEL: STRATEGIES & REFLECTIONS BY GROUP

Group 1
Parents and teachers need to educate themselves on social media (accept that it exists)
Treat it as sex ed. (Outside support)/drug-ed
INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES ON CYBERVIOLENCE
Explain what could happen (consequences)
Explain the resources
Intentional exclusion
Role play
Have a detailed explanation of bullying activity
Have someone relatable be there for the children

Group 2
Make it part of the curriculum in school
Incorporate activities: - Privilege walk   - Scenarios in a hat
Teachers make their students do a research project on cyberbullying
Teachers can seek support from: parents, other teachers, counsellors, principals, school board, anti-bullying organisation, etc.
Resistance in efforts can be caused by people not having the time, responding late, not putting the effort to help solve the issue.
Teachers can overcome this resistance by keep trying, not giving up on the goal

Group 3
Addressing the class as a whole
Bring the situation to the attention of administration
Facilitating emotion provoking activities (e.g. privilege walk, writing workshop, freewrite, self-reflective activity on one's feelings).
Seeking support from peers (e.g. other teachers)
Support from administration and students (student unions)
Prepare a course or discussion group on the effects of cyberbullying (educate with feelings)

SYSTEMIC LEVEL: STRATEGIES & REFLECTIONS BY GROUP

Group 1
Compulsory teacher seminars: training awareness specifically to cyberbullying.
Educate students specific to their grade level: adapt activities to make them relevant and interactive
Make laws clearer and rigid (easy to follow)   - No "grey" areas   - Ensure that the law considers multiple scenarios that can happen
Add more to Bill-56
Who can admin collaborate with?   - School board   - Justice system   - Police   - Social workers
Create support groups (focus on social/emotional aspects)   - Victims   - Teachers   - Parents   - Cyberbully
Don't make it hard for a student to report cyberbullying   - Create a safe environment   - Ensure confidentiality to protect students' identity   - Provide support

- Do not create a stigma around cyberbullying

Group 2
Updated laws and policies → <u>Digital property!</u>
integrate technology into the classrooms (ex: smart boards, tablets/ipads)
Include online communication when using technology in classrooms
Adapt technology use to each individual/child's learning/academic need
Bill C-56 (Bullying) should include cyberviolence
Mandatory (monthly) activities schoolwide as a reminder (open to parents as well)
Workshops for teachers (on ped day for ex) where experts on the subjects are brought in

Group 3
Teaching parents about bullying and passing it on at an early age to their children
Strengthen school policies on bullying
Stronger actions and consequences (0 Tolerance)
Administrators can collaborate with the children's parents
Bullying Prevention Program