

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women continues to be a major problem in U.S. society in the 21st century. Our rates of rape, sexual abuse, spouse abuse, and sexual harassment are the highest in the industrialized world.

Each year, according to national crime statistics, more than one-half million women are raped. Half are raped before the age of 18. Contrary to one of the old myths about rape, most of these victims are assaulted by someone they know, including family members and friends. Rapists come from every socio-economic class and racial background. Most have a "normal" appearance; you can't tell if a person is a rapist by how they look.

Annually, millions of girls are sexually abused. Much of this abuse happens to adolescents. But sometimes girls as young as two or three are abused by members of their own family, or other adults in care-giving roles. The high incidence of child sexual abuse is one of the great tragedies of modern American society.

On average, three women every day are murdered as a result of domestic violence. According to the Surgeon General, battering is the leading cause of injury to women in the U.S. More women are injured by partners or spouses than by automobile accidents, athletic injuries, or household mishaps. Sometimes these injuries result in emergency room visits. Domestic abuse is one of the leading causes of emergency room visits by women. It occurs in every socioeconomic class and racial group. Batterers can be middle-aged, twenty-something, or high school students. They can be stockbrokers or truck drivers. Family violence doesn't discriminate by age or profession.

Millions of girls and women suffer sexual harassment in school, in the workplace, and on the street. One national study found that 83% of the girls responding reported being harassed at school. Women and girls of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are harassed by peers, teachers, and employers.

There are no easy solutions to the problem of violence against women. Over the past two decades, services for rape survivors and victims of domestic violence have improved, although funding for these services is often precarious and frequently inadequate to the scope of the problem. There has also been an increase in the number of programs for sex offenders and batterers, although activists in the battered women's movement still maintain that sentences are typically lenient and abusers are rarely held accountable, either by the law or by their school or employer.

While the problem is deep and widespread, better services for victims, more effective treatment of offenders, and an increased focus on prevention through education and community awareness campaigns offers the hope that one day violence against women will not be such a common event, but rather a rare and aberrational occurrence.

Study guide for "Violence Against Women" exercise

1.) Read the entire page.

What do you notice about the writing? What is missing in the discussion of the issue? Is this piece something you might find in a newspaper editorial or another mainstream publication? Why would someone writing about gender violence use language this way?

2.) Circle the words that refer to people (e.g. "rapists" or "girls").

What do you notice about the language used to describe people? What words are used to describe people you might reasonably infer to be men? Women? What are the differences?

3.) Take a paragraph or a sentence and rewrite it in the active voice.

How does the meaning change as a result? Find or write some active sentences or phrases and then rewrite them in the passive voice. (e.g. "violence against women" becomes "men's violence against women"). How does the meaning change as a result? Is the passive voice ever justified? If so, why?

4.) How does the way we use language to discuss the issue of gender violence affect the way we think about it?

What, if any, impact does this have on our ability to devise effective strategies to prevent it?

OPTIONAL ASSIGNMENTS

1) Come up with some examples of passive voice in newspaper, magazine or Web-based articles – including headlines -- about social or political issues. Why did the writer choose to use the passive voice? How does this choice affect our understanding of the issue at hand? 2) Rewrite the article on the reverse side of this page, only this time change all of the passive sentences to active ones. Also, change degendered words to gendered words (i.e. say "men who rape" rather than "rapist"). Discuss whether or not this changes either the tone or the meaning of the article.