

Jakubowicz has put it, is to enable each significant social and cultural group to circulate ideas, perspectives and information in such a way as to reach all other segments of society. While public broadcasting at its best has sometimes approximated such a public sphere within individual nations, the challenge is to begin that project at a global level. While UNESCO's *MacBride Report* was buried by a campaign of vilification in the 1980s, the serious North-South (and other) imbalances of communicative power which it highlighted have yet to be addressed.

Yet we should not assume that more and better dialogue, or more accessible and pluralistic media structures, will automatically resolve global conflicts. Quite apart from the many other levels of institutional change needed to assure a humane future, democratization of the media implies more than structural reform; it entails cultural shifts. As Charles Husband argues, the right to communicate, even if embedded in widespread access to the means of communication, needs to be supplemented by the right to be understood—which requires an ethos of willingness to listen to the 'other', and indeed to insist that the 'other' be heard. That ethos poses a challenge not only to allegedly closed and pre-modernist cultures in the Islamic world, with their tendencies towards fundamentalism and authoritarianism, but also to the consumerism, arrogance, indifference, and the persistent temptations of racism and fascism in the West. A globally democratized media system could encourage Americans, as citizens of the world's hegemon, to come to terms with their own history and role in the world, as seen through the eyes of others. Such a breakthrough could be pivotal to progress on issues of global economic justice, environmental sustainability, and political democracy.

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## Race, Gender and Aggression: The Perceptions of Girls About the Violence in Their Lives<sup>1</sup>

—Margaret Jackson

*In the street or in school, it's the same. I don't feel I belong. But I learned that if somebody beats on me, I'd better beat back or I'll keep getting hurt. Actually, now I get respect because of it.*

—Lena, immigrant girl, aged 14

Lena's words capture the dilemma experienced by many young marginalized girls in Canada today, but which seem especially true for young immigrant and refugee girls. To fit in, to survive, they may turn to aggression; otherwise they may find themselves the target for aggression. Numerous authors focus upon individual risk factors to explain and/or predict why some girls are more prone to aggressive and violent behavior than others. In the present paper, the examination shifts to consider the social context within which the particular factors of race and gender can prove to be 'risky' for girls.

Evidence that the social location of immigrant and refugee girls constitutes a form of risk in and of itself comes from a 1993 UN Working Group Report in which the members indicate that such girls "experience higher rates of violence due to the impact of racism and sexism in their communities and the host society and due to dislocation as the result of immigration" (Barron, 2001:1). As Jiwani (1998) comments, the girls are "caught between two cultures where their own is devalued and inferiorized, and where cultural scripts in both worlds encode patriarchal values" (p.3). As well it appears that refugee girls are actually in a more vulnerable position than refugee boys are in this regard.

In some cultural contexts, girls are less valued than boys and, consequently, are at higher risk for neglect and abuse. Their participation in educational endeavors, for example, is frequently prematurely curtailed and they are subject to sexual abuse, assault, and exploitation in greater number than are boys (*UNHCR Policy on Refugee Children*, 1993, as quoted in part by Cameron, 2001:2).

It will be the intent of this paper to make a closer consideration of the sociocultural factors which may contribute to and have an impact on the immigrant and refugee girl's vulnerability relative to aggression. Framing the analysis throughout, the voices of the young women themselves serve as the data. In the attempt to make meaning of their experiences, the theoretical lens employed is anti-racist, feminist and rights-based. The rights-based perspective is appropriate, as it is evident that these factors of race and gender "place the immigrant and refugee girl-child at greater risk for all forms of discrimination and human rights violations" (Cameron, 2001:3). In essence, examining how these sociocultural factors uniquely intersect (Jiwani, Janovicek & Cameron, 2002:49) for the girls will provide an understanding which should then be contrasted with a similar focus

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an earlier and shortened version of a chapter to appear in *Girls and Aggression: Contributing Factors and Intervention Principles*, edited by M. Moretti, C. Odgers, and M. Jackson. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers (2003).

placed on how individual factors, such as mental health status, have an impact on their vulnerability.

The concept of interlocking systems of domination forms the theoretical basis for the former analysis (Razack, 1998). It is critical, as Razack argues, to consider in a historical manner the meaning of race, economic status, class, disability, sexuality, and gender as they converge to construct immigrant and refugee girls within hierarchical social structures (Barron, 2001:10). In this paper, the focus is limited primarily to the examination of the impact of race and gender, or more accurately, the processes of racialization and gendering (Chan and Mirchandani, 2002:12) upon the aggressive outcomes for the girls. The study of processes rather than static factors allows for a deeper appreciation of how these categorizations are constructed through continuous interactions in society, continuous constructions of 'other' and 'self' in hierarchical ways (Ibid.:12-13).

### Study I: The Voices of Immigrant and Refugee Girls

Three interrelated FREDA studies are discussed.<sup>2</sup> The first study involved 59 immigrant and refugee girls of colour in 14 individual interviews and six focus groups. Their countries of origin, or their parents' cultures of origin, included 18 countries, including, China, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and Zaire.<sup>3</sup> The age requirement for the girls and young women was that they be between 14 and 19 years of age. The questionnaire was developed with input and feedback from a group of young immigrant and refugee girls. As well, young women of colour led the interviews and focus groups.

The girls were asked to talk about their experiences in school and with family and friends. It is a 'lived realities' approach which can then be used

for comparison with the intended outcomes of relevant policies and programs developed to assist the girls. One question, for example, asked how the girls felt about their treatment in the school environment—safe, respected? Their responses could then be compared with what is attempted to secure that safety and respect by way of such initiatives as anti-bullying and multicultural programs.

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Turning to the findings, the most prominent theme of note to emerge from the interviews and focus groups was what the girls described as a struggle for power among young people from different cultural groups (Jiwani et al.: 67). Those struggles were often violent. Many, though not all of the girls pointed to racism as a key reason underlying violence in the schools and they recognized intercultural tensions as a feature of school life (Ibid.: 67).

A quote from an interview with a Persian girl sets out the intercultural divisions that seem to underlie the tension:

You know in high school people are like that. They talk behind each other's backs. I don't know why. They hate them because of their culture, where they're from. Because people in this school hang out with each other... They just like hanging out with their own country people (Ibid.: 67).

Many of the girls talked about the difficulty of fitting into the dominant culture. It is true that girls who are located differently because of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability and/or class generally are at greater risk of being taunted and targets for violent acts because our society tends not to value those who are different (Jiwani et al.: 68). Among the most vulnerable appear to be those girls who have just arrived in Canada. In schools, recent immigrants are called FOBs, an acronym for "fresh off the boat" (Ibid.: 68). One interviewed girl from Persia defined it this way: "FOB is like fresh off the boat. It means that you're really geeky and you don't know how to speak and stuff. You dress stupidly or whatever, right?" (Ibid.:68).

Assimilation is one answer for the girls but can entail a loss of identity with their own culture or negotiating a balance between the two, often competing, traditions (Ibid.: 68). One interviewed girl described it this way, "(s)ometimes I feel like I have to lose my 'true' identity to fit in" (Ibid.: 68). The process of identity formation then can clearly be problematic for these girls. Their sense of belonging is influenced by their particular location in a culture, on the one hand, and the disjuncture of that location from the dominant culture's norms, on the other.

From the interviews, it became evident as well that schools are often seen as sites of external control rather than serving as places of support or safety. Schools are places where the tensions become crystallized, and where many

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<sup>2</sup> FREDA is one of five research centres across Canada originally funded by Health Canada and SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) to undertake research in the area of violence against women and children.

<sup>3</sup> The first report is entitled "Erased Realities: The Violence of Racism in the Lives of Immigrant and Refugee Girls of Colour" and was authored by Yasmin Jiwani, Nancy Janovicek, and Angela Cameron. It was funded by Status of Women Canada.

girls expressed frustrations with what they experienced as discrimination against immigrant and refugee girls. A South Asian girl commented that, "(f)rom what I've seen, the kids fear it (racist acts in school) so they won't go and tell people about it. They'll just keep it inside. And I think that sooner or later, it's just going to make them explode. So if I could give advice, I'd tell them, number one, go to a person who you know you can trust. I wouldn't say first to go to somebody at school" (Jiwani et al.: 71).

In addition to general challenges at school, the girls also identified problems with language as an obvious reason they felt marginalized in schools. Often these young women are streamed into alternative classes because they have not yet developed efficient language skills (Janovicek, 2001: 11). A Thai girl, who lives in a small British Columbia Interior town, explained that for the first two weeks of school she did not understand a word that was said in class. When one of her parents explained this to the teacher, she was subsequently placed in remedial classes because English as a Second Language (ESL) classes were not available (Ibid.: 11).

As well, the girls can be taunted for their accents and for the clothes that they wear. Their own parents, who encourage them to fit in, often do not have the economic resources to purchase designer clothes that are almost mandatory in many popular school groups (Ibid.: 11).

Having examined how the processes of racialization and gendering can impact on the girls' vulnerability to marginalization and aggression, we now take a look at the 'flip side', that is, how those same processes can come together to increase the vulnerability to commit acts of aggression themselves.

### Study II: Immigrant and Refugee Girls on Probation

The second supplemental FREDA study interviewed eight girls who were either on probation or had been on probation.<sup>4</sup> The same basic questionnaire employed in the first study was also used for the second (with some modifications

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because these girls were not as likely to be in school at the time of the interview and because the focus was more upon their criminal justice experiences). In the questioning, the girls were asked about specific areas dealing with "the kinds of violence the girls were knowledgeable about, including questions about racism, health issues, and survival strategies" (Barron, 2001: 13). In fact, half of these respondents had been charged with assault (Ibid.: 15).

Barron notes that "(f)irst the girls only appeared to recognize racism as a factor in violence when asked if they would define racism as being violent." One girl said yes, explaining that, "even though the

person isn't physically [hurt], it hurts them emotionally inside, you know, and I think that hurts more 'cause when someone hits you, it could be over, but when someone says something about your race, you could be thinking about that for the rest of your life, and you'll have doubts about that kind of race" (Ibid.: 24).

It is interesting that, unlike in the first study, few girls made connections to race as a factor in triggering aggressive encounters. One example can be seen in the response made by a girl against another visible minority girl:

When you fight, it's nothing about race, it's all about popularity... You don't just hate someone because of what they are, but how they treat you (Ibid.: 23).

The same girl indicated she had been called racist names when she was in grade seven, and it offended her at the time, but now she says she is proud to be referred to as "China-woman" (Ibid.: 23). This kind of racist naming gets explained away by another girl who offers the rationale that the person does not intend to be racist, they are just 'mean-spirited' individuals. There was also the belief expressed that there was more conflict between different visible minority communities than between people of colour and white people (Ibid.: 23). Thus the process of 'conventional' racialization by the dominant culture becomes obscured.

Another girl's case—Amy's—is interesting and of relevance to the discussion on the role a girl's experience of violence against herself can lead to their own involvement with violence as perpetrators. Amy was charged with assault and admitted to the charge saying, "(m)y mom hit me, so that's when they took me away. When I went into care, I didn't know anything right, so I assaulted my foster mom and that's how it all started" (Ibid.: 17). And again,

<sup>4</sup> The second report is entitled "The Invisibility of Racism: Factors that Render Immigrant and Refugee Girls Vulnerable to Violence" and was authored by Christie Barron. It was funded by SSHRC, Grant No. 829-1999-1002.



quoting Barron, “(s)he further explains that her mother, who cannot speak English, was not given any support after she and her father immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong and then her father left the family without financial resources. It is ironic and disturbing that Amy’s charges of assault and uttering threats stemmed from a process of her being placed into care for her own ‘safety’ from her own mother” (p. 25).

Amy’s experiences exemplify how a particular social location can impact negatively on how an individual is perceived and processed as a risk. Here the concept of risk can work to the disadvantage of these girls. It is worthy and relevant to note the emphasis on the determination of risk for decision-making about girls on probation, e.g., that is evidenced in the British Columbia Youth Community Risk/Assessment instrument. One risk factor of concern in that instrument, for example, is the fact that “(t)he youth is facing difficulties or conflicts relating to cultural, ethnic, or religious adjustment, including conflicts or adjustments with peers or family” (Barron, 2001: 18). But the question has to be asked: whose risk has priority in decision-making here, the risk of the girl

to the community or the risk to the girl in the community? These are policy and rights questions.

There appears to be the assumption that the problems the immigrant and refugee youth who has come to the attention of the justice system experiences arise from difficulties in her or her family’s adjustment to the dominant white society (Ibid.: 18). The difficulties of adjustment are articulated as difficulties of not integrating sufficiently, or not releasing cultural traditions sufficiently to fit in (Ibid.: 18).

Yet another systemic factor which impacts strongly in the riskiness of the immigrant and refugee girl is poverty. It is already evident that there are links between poverty and discrimination against women and children (*Working Group on Girls*, 1995: 2, as quoted by Barron, 2001: 19). These connections are proven here in Canada for immigrant and refugee women and their offspring. With their lesser economic status and restricted labor force involvement, they are vulnerable to being assessed as not ideal citizens (Cameron, 2001: 19). One example to illustrate this situation is the one whereby the professional credentials of many immigrant and refugee women are not recognized in Canada. Or, at another extreme, the disadvantaged situation of domestic workers at risk is not resolved (National Association of Women and the Law, 1999: 8-12; Fitzpatrick and Kelly, 1998, as quoted in Cameron, 2001: 20).

In summary, Barron concludes that it is the risk assessment process in the justice system that contributes to the immigrant and refugee girls’ vulnerability to getting caught up in that system (p. 26). In essence, the emphasis on the individual girl’s problems of adaptation to the dominant society denies the systemic prevalence of violence in their lives (Ibid.: 26). As we have seen, it is the system—in this case

the justice system—that can set these young women of colour up for failure, through the system’s own technologies of assessment. And it is the intersection of processes such as racialization, gendering and povertization, not individual factors, such as the mental status of the immigrant and refugee girl, that figure most prominently in the equation.

### **Study III: The Voices of Service-Providers Working with the Girls**

The third FREDA study examined the perceptions of service providers who work closely with girls and provides confirming information for the other two projects’ findings.<sup>5</sup> Five roundtables were conducted with 38 service providers, 10 of whom work with street-involved girls, 10 with lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered girls, 8 with Aboriginal girls, and 6 with girls with disabilities. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with four service providers with immigrant and refugee girls (Janovicek, 2001: 2). The goals of the roundtables were to gain an understanding of the girls’ lives and to brainstorm around ways to support girls. The participants were asked to comment on the factors influencing girls’ identity formation, their vulnerability to violence, the barriers the girls face, and how they understand and respond to systemic disadvantage. Finally, the service providers also spoke to the question of how policies impact on girls’ lives and made recommendations for reform (Ibid.: 2).

Those interviewed point out that a lack of services for these marginalized girls makes them more vulnerable to violence. Girls who do not meet the dominant society’s expectations will not be seen as fitting in. The participants argued that existing services are more often likely to be based upon models of social control and punishment than assistance and support (Ibid.: 4). These

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<sup>5</sup> The final report of that project is entitled “Reducing Crime and Victimization: A Service Providers’ Report” and was authored by Nancy Janovicek. The study was funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre, Community Mobilization Program, Ministry of Justice, Canada.

responses appear to be derived from more general societal perceptions that the youth are out of control and need to be reformed. Improving services therefore would require a shift in how both service providers and the community think about young people from the margins (Ibid.: 4).

One quote from a service provider working with immigrant and refugee girls nicely encapsulates the general sense of the respondents with regard to the role the system plays in creating the disadvantaged state for these marginalized girls:

I think it's set up though to alienate some children in the interest of others, the whole system... institutions, penal institutions... They're creating it for those people who they've set up to put there. And most of them don't expect their golden children to be there and they end up there. This is where we have the therapists and all the psychologists and the psychiatrists justifying why this person's behavior would be like this. You never hear such justification for the poor kid or the racialized kids who get institutionalized (Ibid.:5).

The service providers also felt that conflicting cultural values between the family and the dominant society are a major problem for the youth. First there may be disciplinary measures taken in the immigrant or refugee home that conflict with Canadian norms. Spanking is only one example of that kind of unacceptable measure legally sanctioned in Canada, but not an uncommon practice in other countries. Sexual mores represent another common area of conflict (Ibid.: 11). Though sexuality can be a hidden issue in many immigrant and refugee communities, in the Canadian culture, women of colour are often sexualized (Ibid.: 11) in the media and other means of communication in the dominant culture. Therefore mixed messages get delivered to the girls, but silence on the topic in their home does not allow them to understand the messages. Other issues such as HIV/AIDS, homosexuality and acceptable sexual practice can be

similarly hidden (Ibid.: 11). As a result, although most of the girls interviewed in the first two studies indicated they were proud of their heritage and family, the family itself does not evolve as the site for support or clarification on the sensitive issues which make the girls even more vulnerable to negative external influence.

The service providers interviewed also identified schools as a primary site of violence for the girls. Unfortunately, "intercultural tensions among young people are seldom understood to be a manifestation of racist and patriarchal relations" (Ibid.: 10). In the report it is argued that, instead, the media and teachers tend to emphasize bullying as the problem. Again, individual children are blamed with little attention paid to the sociocultural dimension (Ibid.:10). One reality is, though, that the process of racialization in the school system is demonstrated in the negative experiences identified and the high drop out rate of young women of colour (Fernandez et al., 1989; Kelly, 1998; Mogg, 1991, as quoted in Barron, 2001: 27). This can trigger a downward spiral in which the girl drops out of school, becomes alienated from her family, hits the street and becomes targeted for prostitution and aggression.

It is true that power plays can be involved in the tensions resulting in bullying. Defending the pecking order protects a particular group's social location, and, power relations are also played out within cultural groups on the street as well as in school. As one service provider analyzed:

I think there is an expectation that if you don't exert your power over somebody, then you are on the bottom of the pecking order... It's no different on the street but the level of competition then becomes physical because the only thing that you have left are your fists or your words... I think that we've created a population of young women who just believe that they need to victimize someone else to get their own power back because what they've been taught is you're either a victim or a victimizer

(Janovicek, 2001: 4).

Thus aggression which occurs within a peer group sorts out who possesses the control in the group—and this can happen within gender groups as well (Ibid.: 16). The girls are the most vulnerable to the controlling behaviors from male peers. The service providers agreed that boys maintain control over groups of youth on the street. Through the employment of violence and sexual domination, they maintain power and control of the girls (Ibid.: 16).

One service provider explained this in the following way:

In the squats, it's just a given. I've heard young women say, "just choose now who you're going to have sex with because you're going to have sex with somebody to stay here because that's the way it's run. The guys are making that really clear. That's just the trade-off and that's the power in the squats" (Ibid.: 16).

But teachers and the media tend not to acknowledge that fights and conflicts also often have a racialized edge (Ibid.: 10). When young people of colour do defend themselves against racist slurs and/or bullying, teachers tend to blame them for provoking fights and being the bullies (Ibid.: 10).

The interviewees also commented that students, as we have seen to be true in the interviews with the girls themselves, often do not seem to find racism a problem. They indicated that they find students who are born here, whether Chinese, South Asian, or Black, seem to find an affinity with the mainstream dominant culture and see immigrant and refugee kids as 'other' (Ibid.: 10-11). The latter perception is consistent with what Barron found in her study, when interviewing immigrant and refugee girls on probation, in the referencing of recent immigrants as FOBs.

The most challenging issue for the girls, according to Janovicek, remains the one of different sets of cultural values that frequently conflict with each other (Janovicek, p. 11). Girls in abusive dating relationships, for example,

continue in the relationship just to defy their parents' cultural values (Ibid.: 11). Because of this, they are particularly vulnerable since, as stated previously, they often do not feel they can turn to their parents for help and understanding. Intersecting with the other difficulties with language, gender, and poverty, it appears then that the tensions between cultural values which impact on how one is expected to behave in society create serious dilemmas for the girls.

### Discussion and Conclusions

In reviewing the findings from the three studies, through the theoretical lens initially set out, several common themes emerge:

First, the same systemic processes of discrimination can disadvantage the girls and make them more vulnerable both to becoming targets of aggression and for becoming aggressive themselves.

Second, it is clear that the racialization process for the immigrant and refugee girls can work both within the dominant culture and within the racialized culture itself. That is, the girls may come to internalize the dominant culture's racialized view of themselves as being inferior. Also, the girls provide evidence of feeling discriminated against, especially in the school setting, but they may not connect that same process with their own peer experiences in conflict situations. They recognize hierarchies amongst different 'minority' cultural groups, but construct them as power hierarchies, not necessarily explicitly racial ones.

Third, tensions from conflicting cultural expectations make the girls more vulnerable, especially since many of the girls interviewed expressed mistrust of school authorities to assist in support and counseling as well as the fact that their families were not necessarily seen as locations for clarification on troubling issues about sexuality and bullying.

Fourth, the girls' vulnerabilities arising from their social location can result in the girls being considered as 'risky' from the dominant society's perspective, as was seen to be true for the girls on probation.

Finally, when trying to come up with solutions, all of the above can be further analyzed through a rights based lens, whether it is through application of the Section 15 equality provisions of the

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Charter or such instruments as the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is evident that because of discrimination, their rights to well-being and safety are jeopardized, and should be available to legal remedies, although it is also clear that this route requires advocates for the girls who would carry their case forward.

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