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Reversing the Dominant Discourse of Gender-Based Violence

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Reversing the Dominant Discourse of Gender-Based Violence



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16 Days of Activism aims to empower women and raise awareness about gender-based violence. This campaign has made massive strides in tackling domestic violence, a burden which many women all around the world bear. This topic is important to talk about. Women who suffer at the hands of their partners can feel isolated and stigmatized when in reality many women, some they might even know, are facing the same problem. Western society has deemed this topic "taboo," silencing victims and in the process limiting a shift of power away from abusers.

As a student at Western, I have learned about gender-based violence and proactive steps that can be taken to overcome it. Recently, this topic has come up much more in conversation due to the sexual assault cases reported among female students during orientation week. As a precaution, my friends and I made sure to limit walking alone at night. Thankfully, I have never personally experienced gender-based violence but the idea that it is the job of the women to take proactive steps to deter this type of violence is more than concerning. Why is the solution to gender-based violence covering up, staying in groups, and covering drinks? The societal norms that employ women to change their behaviour to stop unwanted advances are backwards and set unhealthy precedence about gender roles. Precedents like this, set at a young age elicit harmful views that can damage an individual's self-esteem and keep them from reporting gender-based violence in the future.

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I am disappointed in Canada as I think of this issue. Blame the victim tactics are apparent in so many forms in Canada. Survivors of gender-based violence often do not report incidents in fear of the overwhelming stigma surrounding cases of this kind. In reality, 4 in 10 women have experienced some form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime (Statistics Canada, 2021). Abuse is not limited to life at home, women can experience gender-based violence at work, online, or walking down the street.

It is difficult to even say how many individuals are victims of this crime. Reporting rates are low. According to the 2014 GSS, in that year, the majority (83%) of sexual assaults were not reported to the police. In fact, only five percent of sexual assaults were reported (Government of Canada, 2019). What is even lower is the rate of conviction for abusers in all types of gender-based violence occurrences. For the 2016/2017 fiscal year, only 42% of all sexual assault case decisions in adult criminal court resulted in a finding of guilt (Government of Canada, 2019). Survivors who press charges are belittled and degraded by the court system instead of protected. Their stories are reduced into contradicting he-said-she-said and usually end up without justice. This precedent deters individuals from reporting. I imagine some decide the outcome will not be worth the hardships they will most likely have to face in the process. This is understandable in the current context, but not acceptable. It is also avoidable.

This dominant discourse is damaging to individuals as they feel unsupported by society. Systematic change needs to be introduced to alter the current norm. This can be done by supporting initiatives like 16 Days of Activism and calling for a review of how the court handles cases of this matter. The theme of this year's campaign is "femicide or the gender-related killing of women". Women's rights are human rights, effective action needs to be taken to irradiate gender-based violence and reverse this harmful precedent.

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