

**“Does It Have To Be Like This?”**

**Teen Women Ask Their Peers About  
Violence, Hate and Discrimination**

**The report of the  
Teen Women Leadership Development Initiative Survey**



**2001**

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1211 Connecticut Avenue, N.W. Suite 312  
Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: (202) 872-1770 Fax: (202) 296-8962  
[www.centerwomenpolicy.org](http://www.centerwomenpolicy.org)

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## “Does It Have to Be Like This?”

### Teen Women Ask Their Peers About Violence, Hate and Discrimination

#### Preface

This report is the latest in the Center’s ongoing effort to bring to light the role of violence in the lives girls and young women, a journey on which the Center for Women Policy Studies embarked some eight years ago.

In the early 1990s, as the news media began reporting about arrests of girls and young women for violent crimes, we began to wonder whether girls and teen women of all races and socioeconomic classes were responding to their own victimization and a culture of sexual and physical violence by fighting back. The Center’s subsequent review of the literature and our analysis of federally funded violence related programs found little attention either to violence against girls or to acts of violence committed by girls.

We began our preliminary research in 1993 with a series of focus groups and surveys of girls and young women. While most respondents considered themselves vulnerable to violent acts by strangers, acquaintances or loved ones -- our research also shattered a stereotype about female passivity as most girls revealed that they knew young women or girls who had committed violent acts. Our 1997 report, *Victims No More: Girls Fight Back Against Male Violence*, reports the results of our research and our hypothesis that the girls and young women who commit violent acts are responding to the culture of anti-woman violence.

The Center’s 1997 **Summit on Girls and Violence** brought together researchers, advocates, educators, funders and policy makers to strategize about how to further shape research to galvanize attention to these complex issues and how to muster the national will to end the devastating violence plaguing the lives of girls and young women.

Since its founding in 1972, the Center for Women Policy Studies has been a leader in addressing violence against women and girls through innovative and in-depth research, policy analysis and advocacy. During the 1970s, for example, the Center was instrumental in defining rape as a federal policy issue and contributed to development of the federal *Rape Prevention and Control Act of 1975*.

The Center also was the first to place violence against women and girls in the context of widely accepted definitions of bias-motivated hate crimes, an analysis that contributed to the creation of a civil rights remedy for gender-motivated crimes in the *Violence Against Women Act of 1994*. In 1991, the

Center published the groundbreaking report, *Violence Against Women As Bias-Motivated Hate Crime: Defining the Issues*.

In 2000, the Center created the **Teen Women Leadership Development Initiative (TWLDI)**, to develop leadership skills among teen women of diverse backgrounds by teaching them how to apply action research methods to issues related to violence, hate, inclusion, and tolerance.

Today, with the publication "*Does It Have to Be Like This?*," we present the results of the survey conducted by the Center and the teen women participants in the TWLDI program -- a cadre of young leaders from Washington, DC who developed and administered a survey on teen attitudes about violence and their experiences with violence, along with other issues related to inclusion and tolerance.

The Center thanks our partner organizations --The Young Women's Project, Sister to Sister/Hermana a Hermana, and the DC Community Prevention Partnership, Inc -- for their hard work and commitment to this project.

We honor the cadre of teen women whose passion, dedication and hard work brought the TWLDI program to life -- Aminata Ahmadu, Rosalyn Barksdale, Celue Doe, LaShaun Johnson, Claudia Melgar, Amina Smith, and Tyanna Williams. And we thank Adele Stan, writer, and Rose Ann Renteria and Brynn Gaberman Epstein of the Center's staff, who served as TWLDI coordinators in 2000.

We are especially grateful to the Lucent Technologies Foundation for its support of the TWLDI program as part of its Lucent Links initiative. This support has furthered the Center's mission to bring the voices of girls and young women into the public policy debate about youth violence and to inspire a national commitment to girl-focused policy, research and programs in the most basic and elementary way -- by involving young women themselves as leaders.

Leslie R. Wolfe  
President  
December 2001

## **Introduction**

We all live in a violent world, a world whose history has too often been shaped by the forces of hatred, discrimination and fear, distilled into acts of aggression. In the best of worlds, the culture of adolescence has always been a rough-and-tumble thing, rife with hurts and slights and fights, as young people seize the reins of life and learn to jockey for position.

Today's young people come of age in a culture in which the term "rough-and-tumble" is far too tame. In schools and neighborhoods nationwide, weapons find their way into the hands of teenagers and apparently minor tiffs can escalate into deadly altercations. In television sitcoms and the hottest new game shows, verbal abuse has taken center stage as a primary form of entertainment, while so-called "reality" shows promise titillation based on the themes of humiliation and revenge. And violence against women and girls remains a worldwide tragedy.

The young women of the Center's Teen Women Leadership Development Initiative (TWLDI), came to us determined to discern the influences and experiences that lead their peers to violence and victimization. Their leadership will, we hope, help break the cycle of violence they see in their schools and reflected in the larger world. Using research methods they learned at the Center, these teen women created and administered a survey on hatred, discrimination, and violence -- the results of which are reported herein.

According to two of the TWLDI participants who agreed to be interviewed at length by Adele Stan, the very act of having teens ask teens for their thoughts on the violence, hate and discrimination they experience in their everyday lives may itself have a positive impact on teens' attitudes towards violence.

With the permission of their teachers, the TWLDI cadre members distributed the survey forms among their classmates at the beginning or end of classes. After their peers had completed the survey, says one, there "would be that moment of quiet reflection."

"Even after that," she continues, the students who had just completed the surveys "would talk about the way that they acted or certain things they would say."

By an act of fate, the TWLDI women found themselves distributing their survey forms against a backdrop of tragedy. They were completing their final round of training sessions at the Center when two popular students -- a young woman and her boyfriend -- at a local high school were killed by another young man, apparently in a jealous rage.

“Some of the people I gave the survey to, their attitude was kind of different towards violence because of what had just happened with Andre and Natasha, so some of them kind of reassessed,” noted one TWLDI woman.

“But,” she added, “for some people -- it made them act even more aggressive or more violent.” “You could see it was a turning point for a lot of people...They took more time to fill out the survey, because they were really thinking about that.”

Another TWLDI participant lamented that her peers often fail to connect more common forms of violent behavior with the kind of fate that befell the two murdered teens. “People who are in our school, they mostly see violence every day -- like fights,” she asserts. “They’re like, ‘oh, a fight -- okay.’ But they wouldn’t really look back on how violence is a problem until after the deaths. After that happened, they really thought it was a problem. But they still think of violence as an everyday thing.”

As young women, the TWLDI cadre members were particularly sensitive to the topic of sexual harassment and other forms of male aggression against teen women. Even though 61 percent of teen women surveyed reported having personally experienced sexual harassment, TWLDI survey administrators think that number may be underreported because of misunderstandings among teen women about what behavior qualifies as sexual harassment. To confuse matters further, they say, some teen women submit to degrading behavior out of a need to feel liked.

One TWLDI woman reported several incidents that startled her. She said that students in her high school regularly passed around photographs they had taken of their friends and “I would see pictures, and boys would be in the picture grabbing at the girl’s chest and the girl would just be smiling; and I saw another picture and the girl had her breast stuck out and the boy is touching her breast, and she’s just smiling. You would have seen me in the picture hitting him back -- not smiling like that. I think there’s a line between harassment and playing.” But, as her TWLDI colleague noted, “some girls just don’t know where that line is, some of them just say, ‘oh, he’s just playing.’ They don’t think about how they feel. They try to be, like, ‘oh he wasn’t serious about it.’ Or, they’ll make excuses about why he did it -- ‘oh, he didn’t know.’ I hear that a lot.”

TWLDI survey administrators found that although the young men and women they surveyed had similar experiences as witnesses to violence, and similar ideas on the relationship between violence and hatred, the teen women’s direct experience of violence and discrimination differed in significant ways from that of the teen men.

While 45 percent of teen women and men surveyed reported that they wanted to carry a weapon, at least sometimes, among the young women in that group, 67 percent reported having been sexually harassed. But only 22 percent

of the young men who expressed the desire to carry a weapon reported having been sexually harassed, though they were three times as likely to have had a weapon drawn on them.

Peer pressure accounts for much of the violence these young people see at school. In fact, 42 percent of the teens who responded to the TWLDI survey admitted to having disliked another person because their friends did and most of the teen women surveyed said they had been in one “physical fight” during the last year; most teen men had been in two fights.

One group of girls has been fighting intermittently over the course of three years, reports one TWLDI woman. It began over a disagreement between two close friends who then rallied other friends into what the teens call a “beef”.

As a TWLDI leader noted: “I bet if I asked one of them, ‘Why are you fighting?’ they probably wouldn’t even know anymore; it just became so petty. It probably was something small, and they just blew it out of proportion.”

The other interviewee expressed concern that teens often overlook the impact of words and how they can lead to physical aggression. When asked what she would like her peers to hear in the survey results, she said: “They don’t have to break down the numbers, but just somebody, somehow has to get the idea that violence isn’t just guns. It’s verbal -- people acting stupid, people acting petty.”

Survey results revealed that, in the minds of these young people, the concept of “hate” was linked with violence. A great number of the teens also named racism and other forms of discrimination and prejudice as linked to the idea of hate. What is surprising, then, is that the respondents were less likely to name racism as a *cause* of hate, but rather named a range of stressful emotions and circumstances in which their own experience as targets of prejudice and discrimination no doubt played a role.

When asked to list words that express what they think causes hate, for example, one teen replied, “emotional distress.”

“Emotional distress causes them to hate themselves,” explains a TWLDI survey administrator. “I think that if they have hate in themselves, then they’ll find a reason to hate others. They think, ‘I have low self-esteem, so let me go ahead and talk about this person over here to make myself feel better,’ and then people talking about each other leads to fights.”

Both young women expressed frustration with the way in which the adult world, particularly media, portrays youth violence. “You know, they just act like we’re just Satan’s children and nothing can be done for us,” said one. While eager to take responsibility for stemming the tide of violence among their peers, these two young women also want adults to refrain from being too judgmental

without taking stock of their own actions: “They can’t say that all this violence is done by teens when it could have been done by adults who they saw pull weapons on people. It could have been their parents who they saw hit other people, or normal, everyday people they could have seen.” Or, it could be “a young boy, who is brought up in a household where his father beats his mother, so he has all this anger up inside and can’t do anything to his father, so he thinks, ‘why can’t I just do it to other people?’ So this violence just builds up in him and that’s the only thing he sees when he gets home. So, that’s the only way that he thinks he can solve things.”

Still, because of the role of peer pressure in their lives, these two young women and their cadre sisters believe that they must step up and try to increase the peace. “I think that in our age group, someone has to lead because nobody would want to look up to anybody who’s not their own age.”

## **Methodology**

### **Creation of the Cadre and Development of the Survey Instrument**

Early in the development of the Teen Women Leadership Development Initiative (TWLDI), the Center established partnerships with three local girl-serving organizations which served as advisors to the project: Sister to Sister/Hermana a Hermana, the Young Women’s Project, and the DC Community Prevention Partnership, Inc. These partnerships afforded the Center, a national organization based in Washington, DC, vital links to the local community and facilitated the recruitment of a diverse group of teen women leaders to form the TWLDI cadre who would develop and administer the survey to their peers.

As the partnering organizations recruited teen women to the project, the Center staff spent the fall of 1999 creating a curriculum that would both teach action research techniques to the TWLDI women and increase their knowledge of issues related to violence, hate and discrimination. The curriculum also was designed to help the teen women explore their own feelings about and understanding of violence and hate -- especially violence against women and girls and the links to intolerance and discrimination.

Between January and June of 2000, the 11 teen women recruited as cadre participants met regularly, for a total of nine two-hour sessions. By April, scheduling conflicts forced four of the original cadre members to drop out.

In the sessions, the young women discussed and shared stories about issues related to key concepts introduced in the Center’s curriculum -- including

bias, intolerance, discrimination, hate crimes, racism, sexism, prejudice, stereotypes, power and control, religious violence, homophobia and sexual harassment.

Guest speakers occasionally visited the group to share their expertise. Suzanne Marcus and Katie Welsh, community outreach coordinators for My Sister's Place, made a presentation on teen dating violence and prevention. From Lori Humphreys, managing attorney of Ayuda, Inc., the teen women learned about domestic violence in the lives of immigrant women. Two visitors from the DC Rape Crisis Center, director of community education Alina McClerkin and program assistant Yolanda Wilson, discussed rape and sexual violence.

In addition to presentations, Center staff also involved the teen women in activities to increase their knowledge of the nature and extent of violence in society and the impact of this violence on women and girls, their families and communities. Most importantly, Center staff sought through these activities to increase participants' understanding of themselves.

The teen women were then taught how to use basic action research methods. Together, the teen women and Center staff designed a survey on teen violence, pilot-tested and refined the instrument, and then administered it to 240 of their peers, 60 percent of whom were girls and 40 percent of whom were boys.

The seven TWLDI teen women were actively involved in all phases of the project, from the initial planning meeting with the three local organizations, to conducting preliminary data analysis and reporting survey findings. In the process, they also conceptualized the research design, constructed the survey instrument and administered it to fellow students and friends.

### **Administering the Survey**

During spring break in the 1999-2000 academic year, each of the teen women participating in the cadre received 15 copies of the survey to administer to their peers when they returned to their regular school schedule. Although the Center expected to receive no more than five or 10 completed surveys from each cadre participant, several requested and returned many more completed survey forms. One young woman administered more than 50 surveys.

The cadre members administered the survey to fellow students in classes, on the buses and subway trains, in the hallways, and in school lunchrooms. The young women all told of their thorough enjoyment of the process of administering the survey. Their peers, in turn, they said, were generally eager to respond. "For me it was kind of easy to do it," said one cadre member, because asking her classmates for their thoughts made them "feel important."

## Demographics of Survey Respondents

At the time they filled out the survey, the average age of the respondents was 16 and most were in grades 11 (31 percent) and 12 (30 percent).

**Table 1: Survey Participants by Grade**

Grade 9	13%
Grade 10	25%
Grade 11	31%
Grade 12	30%

The overwhelming majority of respondents attended public schools in the District of Columbia and a few went to school in Montgomery County, Maryland. The distribution of participants in self-selected racial and ethnic categories reflects the growing diversity in the greater Washington, DC, metropolitan area.

**Table 2: Race/Ethnicity of Survey Participants**

	All Participants	Teen Women	Teen Men
African American	53%	52%	54%
Latino/Hispanic	14%	15%	12%
White	13%	15%	10%
Asian American	2%	2%	7%
Native American	1%	.4%	1%
Other	15%	15%	20%

## **Summary of Major Findings**

### **THE NATURE OF HATE**

**Finding One:** For most of the teens surveyed, the concept of “hate” is linked to violence and/or racism and other forms of discrimination and prejudice. While no consensus emerged as to the causes of hate, respondents referred to “ignorance”, “fear” and “jealousy” repeatedly,

### **SEX DISCRIMINATION -- AWARENESS VS. EXPERIENCE**

**Finding Two:** While teens reported a high level of awareness of racism as related to “hate”, sex discrimination appeared only sporadically as a “thing that comes to mind when you see the word hate.” However, many teen women reported being targets of sexual harassment and other sexually threatening behavior.

### **SEXUAL TRANSGRESSIONS AND WEAPONS**

**Finding Three:** Nearly half of the teen women respondents said they wanted to carry a weapon “at least sometimes” and a majority of these young women reported that they had been the targets of sexual harassment and other forms of sexually threatening behavior.

### **WHEN IS VIOLENCE WARRANTED?**

**Finding Four:** While most respondents said they believe in finding alternatives to violence, both teen women and men feel that violence is acceptable in certain situations and circumstances. Teen women view violence as an appropriate response to sexual assault and to threats of physical harm, while teen men find violence justified to settle matters of pride and possession. However, teen women were more divided on the question of which situations warrant acts of violence as a response; for example, a full one-fifth of teen women reported that it is “not okay” to be violent even in a life-threatening situation.

### **The Nature of Hate**

**Finding One:** *For most of the teens surveyed, the concept of “hate” is linked to violence and/or racism and other forms of discrimination and prejudice. While no consensus emerged as to the causes of hate, respondents referred to*

*“ignorance”, “fear” and “jealousy” repeatedly.*

For most of the teens who completed the survey, hatred and violence go fist in glove. So, too, according to the teens, do hatred and racism. In order to better understand teens’ perception of hate, the survey included two open-ended questions.

When asked to “list three things that come to mind when you see or hear the word ‘hate,’” respondents listed such terms as “violence”, “racism”, “death”, “sexism”, “discrimination”, “abuse”, “prejudice” and “ignorance.” A majority of respondents clearly linked violence to the word “hate”. While “violence” and its variations (“violent”, “violent actions”) were most frequently listed, “death”, “destroy,” and “killing” also were frequent responses. Teens also understand that discrimination and prejudice reflect “hate”, especially racism and, far less frequently, sexism.

Respondents also listed “fear,” “dislike,” “anger” and “hostility” as linked to “hate,” and many listed “jealousy” as well along with slang terms for envious people -- “hater” and “player-hater.”

**Table 3. Terms most frequently repeated in response to the word “hate”**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Total</b>
Violence	55	36	91
Race	40	23	63
Death	28	15	43
Anger	22	14	36
Jealousy	20	0	20
Dislike	18	14	32

## **THE CAUSES OF HATE**

When asked their thoughts on the causes of hatred, most respondents saw hatred rooted in ignorance, fear, jealousy and/or abuse. Asked by the second open-ended question to “list three things that cause hate,” teens included such terms as “fear,” “socialization,” “ignorance,” “jealousy,” “peer pressure,” “low self-esteem,” “racism,” “pain,” “harassment,” “prejudice,” “sexual abuse,” “verbal harassment,” “stupidity,” “cruelty” and “broken hearts,” for example.

Indeed, teens most frequently cited “ignorance” as a cause of hate, reflected in such terms as “stupidity,” “lack of knowledge,” “unaware,” “lack of

education,” and “confusion.”

Fear and jealousy appeared with nearly equal frequency on respondents’ lists of “things that cause hate” -- often expressed as “cowardice”, “insecurity”, “envy” and “pride,” for instance. Respondents also cited “peer pressure”, “bad influences” and “showing off” as well as “rumors”, “words”, “talking bad”, “gossip”, “opinions” and “running your mouth.”

The word “abuse” appeared frequently on respondents’ lists of the causes of hate, expressed in such related terms as “mistreatment”, “ridicule”, “teasing”, “harassment”, “verbal abuse”, “physical abuse”, “sexual abuse”, “torment”, “being mean”, “cruel people”, “name-calling”, “disrespect” and “neglect.”

Teens also recognized racism as a cause of hatred, expressed as “difference in race”, “color”, “hate between races”, “segregation”, “prejudice” and “discrimination.”

Some teens listed “religion”, “sexual orientation” and “sexuality” as causes of hate. And problems between the sexes sometimes cropped up, expressed by such terms as “gender”, “love quarrels”, “relationships”, “he say/she say”, “unfaithfulness” and “broken hearts.”

### **Sex discrimination -- Awareness vs. Experience**

***Finding Two:*** While teens reported a high level of awareness of racism as related to “hate”, sex discrimination appeared only sporadically as a “thing that comes to mind when you see the word hate.” However, many teen women reported being targets of sexual harassment and other sexually threatening behavior.

### ***Witnessing and experiencing violence***

#### **As witnesses: Teen women and teen men report little difference**

The TWLDI survey results make it clear that teens regularly witness and experience acts of violence, hate and discrimination. More than three quarters of respondents report that they have witnessed the physical abuse of another young person. Almost as many teen women (45 percent) as teen men (50 percent) reported having seen a confrontation involving a weapon.

A majority of respondents said they had witnessed sexual harassment, which the survey defined as unwelcome sexual advances, either verbal, visual, or physical. While 62 percent of respondents said they had seen a person being sexually harassed, more teen women (66 percent) reported having seen such conduct, compared to teen men (55 percent). This difference may stem from differing perceptions between the sexes of what constitutes sexual harassment.

In fact, this question yielded the only statistically significant difference between teen women and men reporting violent acts they had witnessed.

Nearly four in ten teens reported seeing someone being violent to another person because of his/her race or ethnicity (41 percent) and both teen women (39 percent) and teen men (45 percent) said they had seen a person being beat up because of peer pressure. Fully one third (33 percent) reported having seen someone direct violence at another person because of his or her sexual orientation while 20 percent said they had witnessed someone being violent to another person because of her or his gender. And 18 percent of respondents reported having seen someone sexually abuse another person -- defined on the survey as being forced into sexual contact. Fourteen percent of respondents said they had seen violence committed against another because of religious differences.

Virtually all of these categories, with the exception of sex discrimination, are included in respondents' lists of "things that come to mind when you see the word hate" and "things that cause hate". And yet, many teens reported they had witnessed sexual harassment.

**Table 4: Witnessing A Person or Group Doing the Following**

	<b>All Teens</b>	<b>Teen Women</b>	<b>Teen Men</b>
Physically abuse or beat up another person	77%	79%	76%
Sexually harass another person (unwelcome sexual advances)	62%	66%	55%
Pull a weapon on someone (for example: a gun, knife, ice pick, or screwdriver)	47%	45%	50%
Be violent to another person because of the person's race/ethnicity	41%	39%	43%
Beat up another person because of peer pressure	39%	39%	40%
Be violent to another person because their sexual orientation is different	33%	32%	34%
Be violent to another person because their gender/sex is different	19%	20%	18%
Sexually abuse another person (when someone is forced into sexual contact)	18%	17%	20%
Be violent to another person because their religion is different	15%	15%	14%

## As targets: Real differences emerge between teen women and teen men

Although teen women and men reported similar experiences as witnesses of acts of violence, hate and discrimination, their paths diverge in reports of their own victimization.

Teen women (47 percent) and teen men (50 percent) do report similar levels of experience as victims of physical abuse, defined in the survey as kicking, pushing, slapping, punching, or shaking. But that is where the similarity ends. Three times as many teen women (61 percent) as teen men (18 percent) reported having been sexually harassed, for example. And 40 percent of teen women reported having been stalked, nearly double the number of teen men (21 percent).

Young women also reported having experienced “unwanted grabbing” in greater numbers than teen men (64 percent for women; 40 percent for men). And almost all teen women (91 percent) reported that they had been subjected to unwanted whistling, as compared to only 20 percent of teen men.

However, teen men reported significantly more encounters with weapons than teen women. While 35 percent of teen men said they had a weapon drawn on them, 11 percent of teen women made the same claim. It is significant, however, that despite this difference, 10 percent of teen women reported that they have had a weapon drawn on them.

**Table 5: Personally Experienced the Following**

	All Teens	Teen Women	Teen Men
Unwanted whistling at you on the street	64%	91%	20%
Unwanted grabbing	55%	64%	40%
Someone disliking you because of your race/ethnicity	50%	53%	46%
Physical abuse (for example: someone kicking, pushing, slapping, punching or shaking you)	48%	47%	50%
Sexual harassment (unwelcome sexual advances, either verbal, visual or physical)	45%	61%	18%
Someone stalking you	29%	40%	21%
Someone pulling a weapon on you (for example: a gun, knife, ice pick, or screwdriver)	20%	11%	35%
Someone disliking you because of your gender/sex	17%	15%	19%

Someone disliking you because of your religion	15%	17%	13%
Physical abuse by a boyfriend or girlfriend	15%	14%	17%
Sexual abuse (when someone is forced into sexual contact)	15%	14%	17%
Someone disliking you because of your sexual orientation	9%	7%	13%
Missing school because of fear of violence at school	8%	8%	9%
Avoiding home because of fear of violence at home	8%	9%	7%

### **Sexual Transgressions and Weapons**

***Finding Three:*** *Nearly half of the teen women respondents said they wanted to carry a weapon “at least sometimes” and a majority of these young women reported that they had been the targets of sexual harassment and other forms of sexually threatening behavior.*

#### ***Feeling the need to fight back***

More than half of the teens who responded to the survey (52 percent) reported having wanted to carry a weapon, with teen men (56 percent) somewhat more likely than teen women (48 percent) to express this desire. However, the reasons given differ vastly by sex.

Among teens who said they wanted to carry a weapon, 30 percent also reported that someone had pulled a weapon on them. When viewed through the prism of gender, differences become apparent, as 52 percent of teen men who report a desire to carry a weapon have experienced someone pulling a weapon on them, compared to only 15 percent of teen women. More often, teen women who want to carry a weapon report having been sexually harassed or subjected to threats that are more subtly ominous than those experienced by a person who has found himself or herself on the wrong end of a weapon.

Indeed, for teen women, the experience of being the target of physically threatening behavior of a sexual nature appears to intensify their desire to carry a weapon. In fact, 67 percent of teen women who report wanting to carry a weapon also report having experienced some form of sexual harassment in their teen years (as compared to 22 percent of teen men). More than one third (36 percent) of teen women who want to carry a weapon report having been stalked, as compared to 28 percent of teen men. And 91 percent of teen women who report a desire to carry a weapon also report having been subjected to unwanted whistling on the street, as compared to only one third (34 percent) of teen men.

Seven in ten teen women (70 percent) who report the desire to carry a

weapon also report having experienced unwanted grabbing from in front or behind, compared to 52 percent of teen men. Like teens who have had weapons pulled on them, teens who have been physically abused (55 percent) indicate a desire to carry a weapon in higher percentages than those who have not suffered such abuse.

The finding that a majority of young women who wish to carry a weapon have been subjected to a range of sexually threatening behaviors is in line with the Center's previous studies of a rising tide of violent behavior by girls and teen women. Educators, community leaders and parents would be wise to find a warning in these results. Though they may not be aware of sexual harassment as a form of sex discrimination, young women increasingly find themselves on the verge of violent rage when they are subjected to it.

### **When is violence warranted?**

***Finding Four:*** *While most respondents believe in finding alternatives to violence, both teen women and men feel that violence is acceptable in certain situations and circumstances. Teen women view violence as an appropriate response to sexual assault and to threats of physical harm, while teen men find violence justified to settle matters of pride and possession. However, teen women were more divided on the question of which situations warrant acts of violence as a response; for example, one-fifth of teen women reported that it is "not okay" to be violent even in a life-threatening situation.*

Virtually all survey respondents (94 percent) believe there are alternatives to violent behavior, a belief asserted in roughly equal numbers by teen women and teen men. However, there are particular situations in which respondents believe a violent response is justified; the five most frequently cited circumstances include: when faced with a life-or-death situation (85 percent); when someone is physically abusive to them (71 percent); in response to violence by a boyfriend/girlfriend (70 percent); when someone tries to force sexual contact on them (68 percent); and, when someone grabs them (68 percent).

Yet differences exist based on gender. For example, teen men replace the last two items on the above "top five" list by: when someone steals from you (65 percent) and when someone pulls a weapon on you (59 percent).

These differences no doubt reflect the gender differences in victimization. Thus, while teen men are far more likely than teen women to report having a weapon pulled on them, teen women are far more likely to experience sexual threats, such as being grabbed.

Teen women and men also differ in their view of when violence is

acceptable -- with teen women’s experience of sexual and gender-based violence contrasting to teen men’s emphasis on matters of pride and possession.

While teen women are more likely to find violence acceptable in situations where they fear physical harm, a significant number of teen women do not believe it is “okay” to be violent under *any* circumstances. For example, one quarter of teen women do not believe it is “okay” to use violence even when someone grabs them (27 percent), is physically abusive (26 percent) or when someone tries to force sexual contact on them (24 percent). Even in a life and death situation, 19 percent of teen women do not believe violence is acceptable.

**Table 6: When is it Okay to be Violent? Gender Differences**

	Teen Women	Teen Men
Someone teases you because of your religion	9%	23%
Someone spreads a bad rumor about you	35%	54%
Someone tries to force sexual contact on you	74%	61%
Someone tries to steal your boy friend/girlfriend	16%	38%
Someone steals from you	40%	65%
Someone grabs you	74%	58%
It is a life and death situation	81%	91%
Your boyfriend/girlfriend is violent towards you	79%	55%

It is important to note that the term “okay” does not necessarily imply a moral judgment; young women who do not think it is “okay” to use violence even for self-defense may have adopted that stance out of pragmatism or fear. In fact, many young women are taught that the way to survive an attack -- especially a sexual attack -- is to *not* fight back. Others may believe that violence, in and of itself, is innately immoral. That a significant minority of the young women surveyed would choose to eschew violence even in the face of sexual attack or death is a result that surely begs further study and response

**Teens as Peace Builders**

Teens believe they can and should have an active role in stopping violence by “getting involved” -- from participating in sports and community outreach to becoming activists for peace. As one respondent urged:

“protest/march – teens do not want violence.”

Respondents also recommend that teens try to teach nonviolence by urging their friends to change their attitudes and, in the words of one respondent, “challenge other teens to inspire positive change.” Teens even recommend teaching nonviolent concepts to their parents as well as to the next generation.

When asked to list three things teens can do to stop violence, teens recommended changes in personal behavior, including efforts to improve communication to avoid violence. As one respondent said: “talk things out, walk things out, or just walk away.” Others wrote of the need for community-building activities -- “work together, mediate situations, express feelings verbally,” said one. And others proposed “peer mediation, education, happiness in their lives” or “diversity workshops, moral support at an early age,” regular “school attendance,” “community programs and jobs.”

Although the survey question asked teens to list things they could do to stop violence, respondents also listed recommendations for policy change. For example, six percent of respondents listed “weapon control” -- “stop bringing or carrying guns or weapons”, “stop selling weapons”, “collect all weapons and destroy them,” and “push Congress to pass anti-gun laws.”

Although the teens surveyed live in a violent world, they clearly yearn for another way of life and believe that they can be change agents for their own and future generations. However, they need the steadfast support of adults to facilitate their roles as leaders in their own communities.

We note with dismay that while the teens surveyed were acutely aware of the role of racism as a catalyst in the conduct of violence, awareness of sexism among this generation of young women was virtually absent, despite their knowledge and experience of sexual harassment and abuse. We recommend that parents, educators and youth workers make a commitment to raise the awareness of teen women and men to the issues of sexual harassment, sex discrimination and sex bias in society, and to specifically address the epidemic of gender motivated violence against women and girls that continues to plague our society.