



Campus Forum on Abuse & Sexual Assault

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The Campus Forum on Abuse & Sexual Assault, Concordia University

At 6:15 on March 26 nearly all seats were filled – an audience that would oscillate between fifty and seventy-five over the next two hours. A long table with four microphones, four glasses of water, and where four panelists would soon sit; a screen behind and a podium beside, was mirrored by neat rows of black folding chairs filled with predominantly women and some men. Behind the audience, creating a fluid entrance to the scene, which was itself situated in a much larger open area, were more long tables – one with pamphlets, posters, and buttons; another with coffee and juice; the furthest with fruits, cheese and crackers. The scene was backed by a wall of large windows and open on the sides to a broader public space where students studied at tables, with their attention split between their own computer screens and the unfolding events. The evening commenced with the Centre for Gender Advocacy's Programming and Campaigns Coordinator, Bianca Mugenyi, at the microphone offering a general welcome and making acknowledgements, followed by the evening's moderator, Centre for Gender Advocacy Administrative Coordinator, Julie Michaud. Michaud introduced the Centre for Gender Advocacy's mandate and activities, specifically its campaign for a Sexual Assault Centre at Concordia University, of which this evening was a part. The "Campus Forum on Abuse & Sexual Assault" was introduced as an opportunity to talk about experiences that are otherwise relatively silenced and to discuss the need for a University sexual assault centre.

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault as a social problem is embedded in collective practices and meanings around gender, sexuality, and violence. The definition of assault used in Canada is: "all incidents of unwanted sexual activity, including sexual attacks and sexual touching" (StatsCan 2008). The term assault may imply violence, but the identification of sexual assault does not depend on this condition. Legally, assault is divided into three "levels" which capture a range of physically harmless to endangering activities. Most sexual assaults that do occur fall within the more mild range of unwanted sexual touching or invitations (81%). Incidents of sexual assault are largely unreported to police (1 in 10) because it is not deemed important enough by the individuals affected (58%), is dealt with in another way (54%), feels too personal (47%), or the police are not a comfortable option (41%). Sexual assault is generally considered a private matter and in Canada most people claim to turn to an informal source of support such as a friend (72%) or

family member (41%) when they have experienced sexual assault. This attests to the importance, not only of alternative sources of support, but general information about how to help someone in crisis.

University is shown to be a high risk time for sexual assault in Canada, and particularly for young adults (15-24) who socialize in evening activities or engage in drinking, common lifestyle elements of this demographic (StatsCan 2008). This risk is highest for females, though men are less likely to report sexual abuse and also less likely to be believed, especially if the perpetrator is a woman (Synnott 2011). According to the National College Health Assessment Survey, post-secondary students are not generally exposed to internal information on relationship difficulties, violence, or how to support others in crisis. Sexual Assault information is, however, more widely available. A simple internet search reveals numerous Universities with dedicated sexual assault services and resource centres. Concordia University is not one of them although it has been announced that a Sexual Assault Resource Centre will be opened in the fall 2013 semester.

What can a campus movement around sexual assault address and how?

The University environment may be an important site for reducing the occurrence of sexual assault, and the availability of alternative support systems a way of supporting those who are exposed to unwanted sexual experiences. The Centre for Gender Advocacy's Campaign for a Sexual Assault Centre began in the spring of 2011 with the awareness that sexual assault centres were increasingly common university services, created in response to the general knowledge that university students and women are at high risk of assault. A thorough review of the existing internal services and policies for sexual assault survivors at Concordia were found to be insufficient, out-of-date, and difficult to navigate, initiating the campaign for a dedicated response to the issue of sexual assault. The main goal of the campaign, which is open to public participation and depends on student-volunteers, has been to canvas for a dedicated sexual assault centre at Concordia. Efforts such as consent workshops, educational events, and a policy review have been significant contributions of this campaign.

What is a Campus Forum?

The Campus Forum on Abuse & Sexual Assault was created to provide a safe public space for otherwise silenced voices to be heard, those of sexual assault survivors. This was discussed in the context of Concordia and the desire for a campus sexual assault centre specifically. The forum consisted of a 45-minute panel discussion followed by a 45-minute open floor, during which time audience members were invited to step forward to the microphone and share an experience, an idea, a comment, or a question related to sexual assault or a centre at Concordia. The panelists included two representatives of the Sexual Assault Centre of the McGill Student Society (SACOMSS), who shared the history of the centre and its current role as an inclusive support centre for sexual assault survivors (as has been summarized); Lena Carla Palacios, a joint PhD Candidate in Educational Studies and Communication Studies (Graduate Option in Gender and Women's Studies), Department of Integrated Studies in Education & Art History Communication Studies at McGill who shared a short film, herself a survivor of sexual assault; and Melissa Wheeler, a current Concordia Student Union representative who had created a campaign called Love Doesn't Hurt to address abuse awareness after her own experiences of relationship abuse and a lack of sufficient systemic or social support. The open aspect of the forum reflected the more organic aspect of the event. While two speakers were confirmed, this time was otherwise left open with the hope that the tone of the evening would marshal the sharing of personal experiences to whatever degree the speaker felt comfortable. A total of seven women would come forward with personal experiences of assault that took place during their university experience.

The following discussion will outline key themes from the evening, which demonstrate the needs of sexual assault survivors and how University assault services can respond to those needs. As will be demonstrated, such a service can contribute significantly toward generating a more consent-friendly and survivor-friendly culture at Concordia and in the community.

What is a sexual assault centre?

Sexual Assault Centres are common responses to the issue of sexual assault that have become largely integrated into basic community services in North America over the past four decades. Two of the panel speakers at the forum represented SACOMSS, a student-run sexual assault

centre which serves the neighbouring McGill University student body. This centre reflects many of the desires for the Concordia sexual assault centre in terms of how it can be modelled and the services it should provide, as well as some key differences. Aspects of SACOMSS that should be included in the Concordia sexual assault centre are: free, confidential, non-judgemental support; a volunteer base of peer-support; educational outreach initiatives; survivor advocacy, including accompaniment to appointments and referrals to outside services; a library of resources; and most importantly, a safe space for support and discussion. The key limitation to which the Concordia centre would like to respond, is the lack of administrative support. While SACOMSS canvassed for administrative involvement, they have been unsuccessful at achieving this. It is expected that Concordia will take a more progressive role, ultimately allowing for a centre to be created that also offers professional support and ensuring a consistent presence on campus. SACOMSS, which was instituted in the eighties, demonstrates that the student body will create what it needs. While Concordia students feel the same, it is important to us that administrative support be found. Indeed the clear and thorough activities of our campaign have confirmed this commitment from the University. This isn't about Concordia as a site of sexual assault, it is about a responsible institution committed to student safety and support for the social problems with which its constituents intersect during their time as students.

The Experience of Assault:

The experiences relayed were each unique expressions of the way sexual assault can manifest. Although each speaker was female, the issue of sexual assault is not exclusive to women or to the survivor alone; the response to assault may indirectly or directly involve those with whom the survivor interacts and even the perpetrator themselves. As one panelist introduced, in her own experience in an abusive relationship while a Concordia student, it was difficult to find the resources she needed and it still is. The forum participants echoed this sentiment.

Speaker A was sexually assaulted in a stairwell in the Hall building in the middle of the afternoon, as an undergraduate student at Concordia ten years ago. She did not know her assailant though he was the friend of a friend, as would later be revealed, and had targeted her specifically. At the time she was heavily involved with and supported by student groups and was coordinating an online sexuality forum for the campus newspaper. She was also married and the mother of one child at the time. Despite what seemed satisfactory mediation through university

administration at the time and what the speaker described as being “plugged into the right resources”, including supportive peers, the speaker and her support system did not have the full sensibility to recognize some of the signs that she was suffering. She struggled in various ways following the incident: anxiety, drug abuse, the loss of ability to continue in her usual activities, and ultimately failing out of school. Despite that administrative management of the issue “went good”, and counselling involved the assailant himself, the perpetrator of the act would reveal years later that he was stalking the speaker and her family. Ultimately, it was the mutual friend who would speak to this man and bring an end to the relation. For the speaker, this man simply did not know what he was doing wrong, “because we live in a rape culture”. For her, it was the friend who ultimately made the difference, not the authorities. As for her, she was still sorting out the consequences, but had returned to school and the stairwells. For her, what we need besides policy and legal or administrative action, is to “teach respect and awareness”.

Culture: The reference to “rape culture” or “hookup culture” is a theme that will reappear in subsequent stories. This refers in large part to a culture of gender relations that are systemically embedded in a patriarchal structure. The implicit ways men are encouraged to engage with women and women with men, produces these kinds of instances that, as will be demonstrated, are not always easily definable. Women themselves, especially as they are developing into their own sexuality, don’t necessarily recognize sexual assault for what it is. Nor do men. The general popular culture around gender and sexuality, the social constructions of gender identities, and a lack of frank discussion about consensual sexual relations, creates a context conducive to sexual assault that is referred to in feminist discourse as “rape culture”. This can include “victim-blaming”, implicit even in the services that are meant to respond productively to assault. The campaign for a sexual assault was taken on by the Centre for Gender Advocacy as a part of its mandate to canvas for improved gender relations insofar as they are systemically embedded.

One of the key aspects of a movement for sexual assault should include general awareness and education. A sexual assault centre at Concordia will set an example in this regard while also providing outreach initiatives to the Concordia community. The university setting provides many opportunities to address the issue of assault by creating a safe social environment. This includes attention to young students in residence, vulnerable groups

such as international students, minority students, or students with disabilities, and fostering safe spaces within and surrounding the university.

Speaker B began by asserting a need to break out of a teaching around sexual assault framed as “how not to be assaulted” to a direction of “how not to assault”. This will facilitate a more direct approach, one which gets at “rape culture” itself. Her foreground to this necessity is that sexual assault affects even those who are informed about its occurrence. She herself has formed a self-belief about attracting particular types of attention despite a confident and personable demeanor. Her own sense of safety changed the first time someone followed her in broad daylight when no one else was around. Being followed is an experience that she has become familiar with as well as being publicly insulted because she appears Native. That she has come to avoid “connecting with people” despite her personality is to her a sign of “rape culture”. Another event that confirmed this was when a group of guys walking toward her pretended to jump at her as they crossed paths, only to watch her frightened response and continue on in laughter. In these cases especially, where “no one actually did anything wrong”, we find a “blatant indicator of the kind of culture we are living in and the type of teachings that are lacking”. She questioned, what is being missed in our education that makes this kind of behaviour justified. For this speaker, what we need is continual popular education about the “culture of rape” rather than about the isolated acts that occur within it and are clearly definable as such.

Education: Based on the claims of forum participants, education is the key avenue through which to respond to and prevent sexual assault. In their words, education needs to include: awareness around what sexual assault is and how it is experienced; how to recognize it in personal experience or in others; how to respond to it personally and in support of another; knowledge about available resources; and how to avoid committing a non-consensual act as well as how to recognize the signs that you may be entering one. The campaign for a sexual assault centre at Concordia has recognized the importance of education to manifesting systemic change, and this has been a significant aspect of its efforts since commencing two years ago. A key strategy of the sexual assault centre campaign, which was echoed in the forum, is to generate knowledge around how not to assault rather than how not to be assaulted. As will be

demonstrated, this includes a more nuanced awareness about the interpersonal dynamics that lead to what are often considered minor acts of assault but have “emotional fallout” nonetheless.

The activities initiated by the campaign that can be subsumed by a dedicated centre include: generating awareness through posters, pamphlets, and digital media; hosting high profile public speakers; providing consent workshops; and educational events such as the public forum. Furthermore, a dedicated sexual assault centre can expand this educational capacity to faculty and staff outreach, specialized training for counsellors, as well as a resource library.

Speaker D stated that she felt a sexual assault centre should embody a culture of what was being experienced that evening: “talking and processing”. Even if it was upsetting and emotional, she felt that a space for dialogue and “speaking up” was necessary. She felt a theme amongst the stories was of women showing how they aren’t who you might expect to be victim to this kind of experience, for whatever reason – in her case it was her physique; she was large and tall, not vulnerable or meek. She spoke to what was for her a “hookup culture”. In her case, she went home with a guy after a night out at the bar, her first, because “that’s what you’re supposed to do”. He was nice, normal, unassuming. Ultimately, she was resistant and even clear about her boundaries, but he was persistent and “all these things happened that I did not want to happen”. Nonetheless, she felt acculturated in some way, that he was just insensitive, that this was normal and now she was more normal, and she should be grateful anyone was attracted to her at all. She initially thought it “wasn’t violent so this wasn’t rape”, but what was it? It was years later that it occurred to her that she had been taught it is as simple as saying no and that her no hadn’t mattered. What about the times a disinterest is not so explicit but it is signalled nonetheless? She said consent should also be about an eagerness, not only an absence of ‘no’ because sometimes “fear can shut you down”. What in our culture allows either party to feel it is okay to move on at this point? People on both sides don’t know what consent is and sometimes it is something “really subtle”.

Consent: The lack of awareness or certainty on the part of the survivor at the time of or following an experience of sexual assault is a common theme amongst the forum participants. This follows closely with the themes of culture and education and can be summarized as the issue of consent. Put simply, consent refers to a mutually desired sexual encounter. At the level

of lived experience, this becomes complicated by seemingly mundane but nonetheless uninvited acts such as a kiss or a touch or a comment, by misread behavioral cues or ambiguous responses, and perceived social or interpersonal expectations. What was apparent in the forum stories is that: a non-consensual sexual experience is not always explicitly such; the perpetrator does not necessarily intend it as such; and that the survivor can attest to her own ambivalence around what was consensual and what was just “normal”. The campaign for a sexual assault centre has initiated workshops at university residence on consent as a way of generating conversation around sexual consent and getting people to recognize that consent is a complex issue. Because it is not easily established in the moment, discussion beforehand is important. These workshops attest to the need for specialized training with regards to the challenges inherent in this topic.

Awareness and frank discussions around consensual sex and non-consensual sex are likely the most important tool toward reducing occurrences of sexual assault among university students, especially the minor acts that go unreported to police and make up the majority of sexual assaults in Canada. A dedicated centre for sexual assault can take on the specialized and sensitive task of generating knowledge around consent and providing mandatory workshops for students who enter university residence.

Speaker C introduced herself as a twenty-two year old woman who first experienced an emotionally abusive relationship in her teens. Once removing herself from that two-year relation, she avoided intimate romantic relationships entirely. In her first year of university at Concordia she was introduced to a young man visiting from Australia through a mutual friend. Because of this shared connection, she trusted him and felt safe when they were left alone together. She remembers going to the bathroom after her first drink and then waking up on a park bench the next morning. Without recollecting the evening or even recognizing the situation she found herself in, she went to a public bathroom and washed her face, preoccupied only with getting to work on time. As time passed, pieces of the evening started returning to her, such as being carried over the shoulder of this man while others in the street cheered him on. It was not until two days later that she realized the gravity of what had happened to her. She went to the university clinic for emergency contraception. She said the first question she was asked was whether the sex was consensual, to which she replied yes which today she cannot understand. At that time, she thought she was fine. What she claimed to have needed was someone to remind her

that it was okay not to consent, that it was okay to see that this was wrong, and that it was okay not to be fine. She needed help to recognize her own denial and avoidance.

Counselling and Peer Support: Sexual assault is expressed as a psychologically challenging and complex experience that may be difficult to recognize at all let alone in its full consequences. Even the participants who found sources of support, still came up against unexpected challenges that were difficult to navigate. We need to know how to recognize sexual assault when it happens, both in personal experience or to a friend, and to acknowledge the denial that is involved both during and following an act of sexual assault. Professional support may be necessary to respond to severe cases especially, but should be accessible to anyone regardless of the severity of their experience. Because friends and family are primarily turned to, more information needs to be made available about how to support someone in need as well as where to find additional resources. In either case, sexual assault has long-term consequences, such as unexpected anxiety or movement into a new relationship, that require the ongoing presence of support options.

A balance of professional and peer support is likely most relevant to the psycho-emotional needs of sexual assault survivors. A sexual assault centre at Concordia will be strongest if balanced between the sources of support. This ensures accessibility as well as preparedness to respond to the full range of needs for survivors particularly as it relates to disclosure, dialogue, and neutral emotional support.

Speaker E stepped up with her black pea coat still on and tears hovering in her eyes. “I am emotional. And that is how it will be. But I need to speak out”. She had been in a sexually, physically, and emotionally abusive common law relationship for some number of years with a wealthy man, who was also the father of her child. She found refuge through a shelter only four months ago, and ultimately the police who issued a restraining order. For her, both were paramount to her leaving and surviving that relationship. She claimed the former to be “safe” and the latter to be “necessary” and “well-prepared” with resources such as psychological support. She was amazed about how much of that relationship she did not see until she was out of it. She felt that the early signs of abuse, its cycles and patterns, need to be taught. She herself was educated, but did not know at the time and felt that the more we know about abuse, the more that can be done to change it.

INCLUSIVITY A theme that would arise throughout the evening is that even those who are personally or socially perceived as ‘safe’ from sexual assault or abuse are not necessarily. The participants themselves did not expect they would be the target of assault. It was often returned to that sexual assault does not fit cleanly into definitions, statistics, categories or our expectations of how and to whom it involves. The experience of sexual assault is diverse. Thus, so are the needs of survivors. While there are important resources available, such as the police, shelters, and counselling, these do not cater to everyone nor is each service in itself fully prepared to respond to the myriad needs of survivors which express personal and cultural nuance. It is clear from the forum that more alternatives are needed, more avenues, more options.

A diversity of experiences calls for a diversity of options. Not only does Concordia need a sexual assault centre, this should openly cater to the needs of individuals of all backgrounds and persuasions, whatever their role in abuse, and wherever they should fall in relation to the statistics. A non-judgemental atmosphere is important to the accessibility of the centre and its capacity to respond to the lived needs of sexual assault survivors. Furthermore, to offer as much diversity within and access to outside resources will be a key strength of the centre.

Speaker F took to the microphone as the final speaker. She was one of the peer support volunteers who were on hand to support participants and audience members as necessary, due to the highly emotional nature of the event. With a larger pink heart pinned to her chest, she had come to the forum for that purpose, not to speak publicly - but here she was. We need to “keep talking” about these issues. From what I have seen tonight, “our vocabulary is lacking”. Rape and sexual assault are too restrictive to encompass all the nuances of what is at issue. What about when your relationship changes from consensual to non-consensual. What about when people with the “right politics” cross that line? They need to be educated too.

Panelist Lena concluded: This discussion is “hard” but it is also “worthwhile”. “You are the experts”. Professionals and policies alone cannot solve the issue of sexual assault. Resources need to be reflective of the community, their fears, and diversities. Those who perpetrate acts are also a part of the solution. “Create the space you need. We are accountable first to ourselves”.

The public forum on sexual assault demonstrates and supports the need for a sexual assault centre at Concordia that responds comprehensively and with relevance to the needs of sexual assault survivors. This will demonstrate a responsible response to the reality that university is a vulnerable time for sexual assault to occur, thus an opportunity for it to be reduced and for survivors to find support. The Concordia sexual assault centre can support survivors by offering an inclusive alternative support system that can then connect that individual to other resources accordingly, including university and community services, and in house peer support. From knowledge about consent to health services, professional counselling to a friend to talk to, accompaniment to class or a legal restraining order, the needs of sexual assault survivors are diverse. A safe, non-judgemental space where staff and student alike can access resources and information about sexual assault will not only support those who experience this life event, it stands as Concordia's commitment to reducing the vulnerability of university students to sexual assault. Most importantly, we can begin to generate a healthier culture of consent.

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