MYTHS AND FACTS

MYTH:  SEXUAL ASSAULT IS NOT A COMMON PROBLEM.

FACT: The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women reports that more than one-half (51%) of women age 16 and over have been sexually assaulted.

A 1984 study found that one in four Canadian women will be sexually assaulted during her lifetime. Half of these assaults will be against women under the age of 16. Women from ages 14-24 are the largest “target group”.

For women with disabilities, these figures may be even higher - one study indicates that 83% of women with disabilities will be sexually assaulted during their lifetime.

A woman is sexually assaulted every 17 minutes in Canada.

MYTH:  SEXUAL ASSAULT IS MOST OFTEN COMMITTED BY STRANGERS.

FACT: Women face the greatest risk of sexual assault from someone they know, not strangers. Of the women who are sexually assaulted, most (69%) are sexually assaulted by men known to them - dates, boyfriends, marital partners, friends, family members or neighbours.

When a woman knows the man who sexually assaults her, it is less likely that it will be recognized as a crime, even by her.

MYTH:  A “REAL” SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIM WILL BE HYSTERICAL.

FACT: Sexual assault is always a traumatic experience. The victim’s reaction to sexual assault may be expressed or controlled. If the woman is controlled and outwardly calm, it does not mean that she wasn’t sexually assaulted. It is important to remember that the victim is demonstrating blocking mechanisms: trying to deny what has happened and attempting to regain some element of self-control. Unfortunately, this response has often been interpreted in a negative manner and the victim has sometimes been labelled as presenting an unfounded story. It is important to remember that the “calm, cool and collected victim” is in the majority.
MYTH: A SEXUAL ASSAULT VICTIM WOULD APPEAR BRUISED AND BATTERED.

FACT: Lack of bruises, cuts, scratches, or broken bones does not indicate that a woman has not been sexually assaulted. The presence of a weapon, threats to harm a third party, or threats of violence toward the victim will often cause a woman to freeze and submit to the perpetrator in order to prevent physical harm.

MYTH: A WOMAN WHO DOESN’T RESIST OR FIGHT BACK HAS GIVEN HER CONSENT TO THE PERPETRATOR.

FACT: There is a misconception that a woman can’t be sexually assaulted by one man and that if she resisted, she could prevent the assault. Sexual Assault is a violent crime and research has shown the 87% of perpetrators either carry a weapon or threaten the victim with violence or death. Women in our society are brought up to be passive, thus by habit or through conditioning, they may hesitate to be impolite or cause a scene until the situation is out of their control or has become dangerous. Physical strength of the perpetrator, presence of a weapon, verbal threats, fear of death and threats of violence toward 3rd parties are all considerations that can “immobilize anyone” and may cause a woman in fear for her life to submit. Submission does not mean consent. Perpetrators interpret a clearly spoken “no” as an invitation to use force.

MYTH: WHEN A WOMAN SAYS “NO” SHE REALLY MEANS “YES”.

FACT: Women are capable of making decisions and taking responsibilities, including saying “yes” if that is what they mean to say. Unfortunately, many sexual offenders interpret “no” as an invitation to take what they feel “belongs” to them anyway.

MYTH: WOMEN LEAD MEN ON OR ASK FOR IT BY THEIR STYLE OF DRESS AND OR THEIR BEHAVIOUR.

FACT: This myth is perhaps the most misleading and devastating myth of all and tends to be a determining factor as to why so few perpetrators are found guilty. It expresses a belief that a woman does not have the right to SELF DETERMINATION: that she loses her fundamental human right to say NO to sexual contact by dressing or conducting herself in a manner which offends some people’s moral code.
What has formerly been deemed as a “socially acceptable”, “attractive” manner of dress, may suddenly be designated “provocative” clothing when worn by a “sexual assault victim”. “Friendly” behaviour is construed as “leading men on” when it pertains to a “victim of sexual assault”. Going for a drink with a man is judged “perfectly acceptable” for most people nowadays but becomes an act of “immorality” and the behaviour of “a woman who is asking for it” if she is sexually assaulted. All sexual assaults are premeditated and research shows that perpetrators are looking for available, vulnerable targets, not women who dress or behave a particular way.

**MYTH:** ONLY CERTAIN KINDS OF WOMEN GET SEXUALLY ASSAULTED.

**FACTS:** All women are potential victims or sexual assault. There is a general misconception that only “young attractive” women are sexually assaulted and that it never happens to “nice girls”. Sexual assault can happen to any woman, regardless of her age, physical appearance, character, lifestyle, ethnic origin or place of residence. Rape victims range from 2 weeks to 92 years old.

**MYTH:** WOMEN LIE ABOUT BEING SEXUALLY ASSAULTED, OFTEN BECAUSE THEY FEEL GUILTY ABOUT HAVING SEX OR BECAUSE THEY WANT TO GET BACK AT A MAN.

**FACT:** Women rarely make false reports about sexual assault. In fact, sexual assault is a vastly **under-reported** crime. According to Statistics Canada, only 6% of all sexual assaults are reported to police.

**MYTH:** WOMEN SECRETLY FANTASIZE ABOUT RAPE AND ENJOY IT.

**FACT:** While some women may fantasize about being raped, the most important element of fantasy is control—she controls whom she fantasizes about and every circumstance of the fantasy. The most important element of sexual assault is the lack of control experienced by the victim. Women may fantasize about being swept away and seduced, but not raped. The very idea that a woman could enjoy being attacked by a man she is not attracted to, that she could enjoy being exposed to injury or death, that she could enjoy being treated in a humiliating and brutal fashion is preposterous. Terror and fear for their lives are the most common emotions experienced by sexual assault survivors.
MYTH: MEN WHO SEXUALLY ASSAULT WOMEN ARE EITHER MENTALLY ILL OR SEXUALLY STARVED.

FACT: Men who sexually assault are not mentally ill or sexually depraved. Studies on the profiles of rapists reveal that they are ordinary and normal men who sexually assault women in order to assert power and control over her.

MYTH: RAPE IS A CRIME OF UNCONTROLLED SEXUAL PASSION.

FACT: Sexual assault is a violent act of domination, aggression and humiliation that is acted out sexually, however, is by no means motivated by sexual desire. It is based on the perpetrator's desire to degrade and control a woman by forcing her to have “sex” against her will. Men can control their sexual impulses. Sexual assaults are premeditated, even if only seconds lapse between identifying a vulnerable target and opportunity, forming the intent and acting on it.

MYTH: MEN OF CERTAIN RACES AND BACKGROUNDS ARE MORE LIKELY TO SEXUALLY ASSAULT WOMEN.

FACT: Men who commit sexual assault come from every economic, ethnic, racial, age and social group. The commonly held belief that women are more often sexually assaulted by men of colour or working class men is rooted in racism and classism.

Men who commit sexual assault can be the doctors, teachers, employers, co-workers, lawyers, husbands, or relatives of the women they assault.

A recent survey on date rape provides a strong indication of the range of potential male offenders. In this survey, 60% of Canadian College-aged males indicated that they would commit sexual assault if they were certain they would not get caught.