

How to Support Students and Colleagues Experiencing Abusive Relationships



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Chair, Women in Mathematics

Preamble

This MOSAICS article is a hard, but important topic. Last September, for the NSERC Science Literacy Day, I was part of a group that organized an event called "Careers in Mathematics: They're Everywhere!" We invited several women with interesting careers in math to talk about their experience and give younger folks career advice. These women spoke about their different paths and the different challenges they faced, this included some very personal and very hard conversations.

One of our speakers shared her experience surviving a violent abusive relationship with her supervisor many years ago when she was a student. She has long since left the relationship and has gone on to have a tremendously successful career. But it was important that she share this story because people who are in abusive relationships need to know that they can get out and thrive afterwards. Our speaker noted that one thing that made the whole situation even worse was that her colleagues didn't realize what was going on.

Professors, and other people in leadership roles, need know how common these situations are, and they need to know how best to support a student or colleague in an abusive relationship. So, for this MOSAICS article, I did an interview with Lynn Thera, Master of Social Work, Registered Social Worker. Lynn is the Coordinator, Sexual Violence Prevention and Response, at the University of Regina Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office. We talked about sexual violence and abusive relationships with a focus on what happens on campuses across Canada, with a focus on what professors need to know and how to support students going through this. There are also comments from a student about what approaches helped her when she was leaving an abusive situation. This is a difficult topic, but with a little bit of knowledge we might be able to help a student in need.

Interview

Me: How prevalent is intimate partner violence?

Lynn: When we look at sexual violence, we're looking at about one in four.

Me: How prevalent are sexual assault and harassment on campuses?

Lynn: The latest statistics, I think it's four years old now, over 70%, 72%, I believe, of individuals that go to university identify that they've either experienced or witnessed sexualized behaviours or unwanted sexualized behaviour.

Me: That's an astoundingly high number.

Lynn: Yeah, when people hear that number, they think that's not a possibility, like there's no way. But the truth of the matter is that those are the numbers, and if you come from within the LGBTQ2s, BIPOC communities and people with disabilities will experience more violence.

Men also experienced intimate partner violence and we don't really have a good understanding of the numbers. What we do know is that more women will end up hospitalized or dead as a result of violence, so the kind of violence is different. [Women] are more likely to fear for our lives in intimate partner violence.

Me: That's interesting. I had a friend who had an issue where there was sexual harassment, and some male colleagues didn't take it seriously. I wonder if they didn't understand the type of violence and were interpreting it as what would happen to them.

Lynn: One hundred percent. When we look at the way women walk the world, it's different than the way men do, just simply because we're raised to know that the world isn't safe for us. We know people that have been sexually assaulted, or have experienced intimate partner violence.

When we look at sexual harassment we all know situations where we feel powerless because there's a power differential. We have a society that's based understanding of violence on a bunch of myths that aren't really true. [Those myths] create victim blaming or the silencing of individuals that experience violence. We often blame the survivor and say, "What did she do?" or, "She's just being silly. He didn't mean it that way." Those are all comments we use to silence people.

Me: That sounds terrible, what services are available on most campuses? And how are you a part of that?

Lynn: We have the Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office, and so does almost every other university. Part of my job is education; the other half of my job is supporting individuals that have experienced sexual assault or intimate partner violence.

Me: Are university policies effective? We know that power structures are very important, and understanding the context is important. It's hard to encode that into rules and regulations.

Lynn: When I came in, one of the first jobs I had to do is create a new sexual violence policy. The good thing about this new sexual abuse policy Sexual Violence/ Misconduct is that it mentions prohibited relationships and that means certain relationships are considered prohibited because of the power differential between students and professors, supervisors, and coaches. These relationships can be had but there needs to be approved by supervisors- the policy aids in clearly exploring the power differentials in certain relationships. Policy is that people with power — that means professors — have to understand their privilege and their power. And you can't have a [romantic] relationship with your graduate student because you have to understand your power and privilege.

Me: Is it standard for universities across Canada to have a policy that explicitly explores power differentials?

Lynn: It's fairly new, but it's becoming more of a thing that's being included.

We look at what happened with the Me Too Movement and that sort of the voicing of the violence women are experiencing what is actually being seen. Things that used to be silenced are no longer being silenced, so no, it's no longer acceptable.

Me: Are there signs or indicators that a professor could use to spot if a student or colleague needs help?

Lynn: It's really important to recognize that part of the violence is keeping secrets. That's part of the reason it keeps going. So, you might see signs, but it's not going to be like bruising. What you might find is the person will say that they have to be home at a certain time, or their partner is looking for them; so you might see controlling behaviours.

Most people in abusive situations feel that they're not being seen. So what I say is, don't go to them and say, "Hey, I think you're in an abusive situation." Your best bet is to say things like, "Do you need anything? If you ever need anything, let me know." A simple comment like, "Are you okay, is there anything I can do for you?" is enough for that person to see there's an opening for when they need it. People won't necessarily come to you when you think they will. They might come a year later.

Me: So what resources are available on this campus or most campuses across Canada for people who are in abusive relationships or experiencing gender based violence?

Lynn: There is this office [the University of Regina Sexual Violence Prevention and Response Office] and counselling services, I can connect them to residences or shelters. Shelters can help with social systems and the legal issues that come with domestic violence. The Student Union is also a good bet, but there's not a lot of extra funding.

Me: What advice would you have for a student or staff member if they have a problem?

Lynn: I'm here for students with a problem and most of our offices are the same way. We understand the complexities of intimate partner violence. We understand the complexities of a sexual assault. I get a lot of professors that will do a soft referral so they'll tell the student to "go talk to the Sexual Violence Prevention and Response."

Me: How effective is the campus reporting process, and what can be done to make it more effective?

Lynn: Well, I think that the system works really well. The problem is our society. 98% of people who have experienced violence will not go through legal systems. And I'm not saying people should go through the system. I'm just saying we're silenced because we're often blamed.

Me: What sort of damage is done with abusive behaviour and sexual harassment and gender based violence?

Lynn: There's a lot of damage that can be done if you feel like you're not being taken seriously because you're a woman. Or if you feel uncomfortable with somebody because they're making comments. You tend to become quieter; you don't feel like you belong.

When you feel unsafe in an environment, you feel less likely to communicate and you are less likely to talk about what's going on. If you experience sexual violence when you're in university you're likely to finish your degree or you will take an easier degree, or your marks will suffer. This has a long-term effect on your ability to make money later in life.

Me: Any final comments?

Lynn: The world is changing. We need to start giving voice to these things that are happening. I think more people are aware of the problems and are trying to support those that have experienced violence. Things that were acceptable aren't going to be acceptable or aren't acceptable and are being called out.

Side bar

Below are some comments from a student Nita* (name changed to protect her privacy). Nita recently completed her PhD in math, but in the first year of her program she left an abusive marriage. Below are her comments about what helped, what is still needed, and advice to people in a similar situation.

Things that helped

When I told my department head, the first thing he asked me was if I needed to take a break and gather myself. It is a big support when your advisors or course instructors address that you are going through a rough patch and are willing to give you some time to catch up. Unlike some who tell you to downgrade because you are not fit for a PhD.

When I left my home, I was homeless but immediately received emergency funding from Graduate Studies. This helped a lot with my rent for the first few months and kept me from sleeping in my office. I appreciate the emergency funds and/or scholarships for anyone who is getting out of domestic abuse.

I liked the security at university, campus security made me feel safe. I did not want to leave campus for the first few months. In my case, my ex and his family tried showing up during my lectures and I had to call campus security twice to escort me to my room.

The counselling services at university, which are free for students, were really helpful. The women's centre on campus is a safe space where you are surrounded by women going through similar things, and you get emotional support without any judgement.

What is missing

I called all women's shelters in my city and they did not have an opening for another six months. I think an emergency shelter, or rooms in residence at the university for students getting out of domestic abuse would be a great initiative, especially if it could be available at a lower price.

Advice to Others

Talk to a counsellor if you are confused about leaving an abusive partner.

It is important to let your advisors in on what is going on. If the abuse is coming from your advisor, then opening up to another professor, head or woman in the department whom you trust and who can guide you.

I have now learned that there are several resources and services on campus such as the women's centre, counselling services, wellness centre, and emergency bursaries from student's affairs which are a godsend to students in need.

Make friends. My biggest support was my group of friends who stood by me for four years. I don't know if I would have been able to get through this without them.

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