

BARS, BOOZE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE: YOUNG ST. JOHN'S WOMEN SPEAK

Introduction

Violence affects women of all ages and backgrounds in Newfoundland and Labrador. Sexual violence happens in our homes, our workplaces, and in our communities. Bars have traditionally had the reputation as gathering places where people go to have a few drinks, socialize, lose their inhibitions and, perhaps, “meet someone”. However, bars can be dangerous places as well, particularly for women.

Women’s groups and anti-violence activists have worked hard to discredit social acceptance of the myth that alcohol is the reason for men’s violence against women. While alcohol may exacerbate a violent situation, the underlying cause of violence is the abuse of power and control, usually by those who are most powerful in our society. Very seldom has this discussion of alcohol and violence focused on bars. It is important to examine the environment of bars in St. John’s as some have suggested they are becoming increasingly sexualized, with seemingly few controls in place to ensure the safety of their patrons. This environment poses serious safety concerns for women. Campaigns against date rape drugs have drawn attention to the issue of women’s safety in bars. Although necessary, these campaigns have emphasized women’s responsibility in taking precautions against those who may want to slip something in their drink. But women’s education alone will not solve the problem of sexual violence in bars. Bars profit from society’s acceptance of women’s inequality through the condoning of sexual violence and therefore have an important role to play. This project was intended to begin a process of meaningful discussion of violence against women in bars and how we can work to make this public space safe and enjoyable for all women.

Project Background

The Regional Coordinating Coalition Against Violence (RCCAV) is a coalition of representatives from community groups, government agencies, and individuals united by a dedication to end violence in our homes and communities. The coalition also acts as the St. John’s Victim Services Advisory Committee. Our purpose is to increase awareness of the root causes of violence and its impact on people in our society, and to advocate for effective services and programs for victims of violence. The RCCAV received funds from the Department of Justice - Victim Services to carry out the project “Bars, Booze and Sexual Violence.” The RCCAV meets monthly to discuss and take action on current issues relating to violence prevention and services to victims of violence. In the fall of 2000 we discussed our concerns regarding the sexually explicit marketing practices of downtown St. John’s bars, such as “wet t-shirt contests” and the recent media coverage of the same. Media reports highlighted the link between extreme alcohol use and safety issues for young women. This project constitutes phase one of the two- part project “Bars, Booze and Sexual Violence”.

The purpose of the project was to:

- Explore young women's experiences in downtown St. John's bars, their perceptions or experience of sexual violence, and their opinions of the environment of downtown bars.
- Examine the degree to which the specific nature of the St. John's bar environment increases the risk of women experiencing sexual violence.
- Begin to identify possible ways in which the second phase of the project can bring about social change to reduce male sexual violence against women.

Phase 2 will seek to develop an effective means to create greater public awareness of the issue of sexual violence against women, challenge attitudes that allow this sexual violence to happen, and increase concern for and action on this issue on the part of bar owners and the City of St. John's.

Methodology

Four focus groups were held between January and March, 2001. The two criteria for participation were that women be under 30 years of age and that they have experienced the downtown bar "scene" to an average or above average degree. The project coordinator/researcher was the Coordinator of the Regional Coordinating Coalition Against Violence. Two active members of the coalition, Leslie Bella and Joyce Hancock, acted as advisors to the project and provided support in the development of focus group questions. Phyllis Artiss assisted with the editing of the final report. Members of the coalition were invited to provide input to the project at various stages.

Participants

Focus group recruitment posters were placed in approximately 50 locations at community organizations, educational institutions, and downtown businesses. One focus group was held at Memorial University while three were held in the community. Two groups were held in collaboration with community agencies serving the youth population. Focus groups size ranged from 12 to 2. A total of 30 women between the ages of 17 to 24 participated. Some women were attending high school or other form of education, some were attending university, others were working, while still others were neither working nor attending school at the time.

Data collection

The project coordinator explained the purpose of the project and provided information on the sponsoring organization. She explained to participants that their participation was voluntary, the information they would provide would be confidential, and that they could withdraw from the project at any time. An information sheet was provided and participants signed a consent form and returned it to the project coordinator. Participants had the option of having their contributions audio taped or not. All but one woman gave consent to be recorded. The duration of focus groups was between one hour and one hour and a half. All names used in the text are made up.

A. PEOPLE AND PLACES

The bars most frequented by participants include but are not limited to: Bender's, Turkey Joe's, Junctions, McMurdo's, Merlin's, Rob Roy, The Cornerstone, Sam Shades, Brewskies, Peddler's, Lottie's, The Sundance, Club Etomik, and the Breezeway. Others mentioned less often were O'Reilly's, The Edge, Calio's, and Peter Easton's Pub. One woman reported she goes to whatever bar is having the best drink specials. Three women said they go where they can hear live music, while one woman said she preferred to go where dance music is played. Common among most of these bars is their target market of young people. Participants reported "going downtown" between five times weekly and once monthly. Several noted that they go downtown more frequently in the summer time, in particular to those bars with outside patios. While a few women reported going downtown alone, most indicated they go with one friend or a group of friends.

B. WHY "GO DOWNTOWN?"

Participants were asked to comment on what they like about going downtown. Their reasons for going downtown seem to be no different than those of most young people.

Some spoke of how they go to socialize, relax from a busy week, and enjoy the music:

"There are people down there that you otherwise wouldn't see. You kinda live your own life during the week and on the weekend come together and it's like, let's communicate."

"It's the social aspect. I work all day everyday, and do classes and how often do you get to see your friends? It's something everybody enjoys doing. Not everybody is going to agree on a movie, not everybody is going to agree on a restaurant, but everyone will agree: 'Let's go have a beer'."

"I am on the dance floor 24/7. Don't stop."

"I like the socializing aspect, I like listening to local music that you can't hear on the radio..I like going to see bands."

"I am a big dance music fan."

Other women said they go downtown to drink or to meet new people, either friends or a potential new romantic interest:

"I go down to dance but there's not one minute that I'm down there that I don't have a drink in my hand; so I go to drink and dance."

"I wouldn't do downtown unless I was drunk. I don't even think I have thought of going downtown sober. It loosens me up to dance."

"It's gettin' loaded and havin' fun and meetin' silly fellas."

“I go ‘cause it’s a change of scenery. They always have different specials, different music, you just start to hang out at the one bar you get to know everybody, and you go to different bars and you meet new people.”

“You can stay home and drink but when you go downtown its just a big old party. You meet people in the bathroom, it’s like, ‘Oh, I love your pants and you just start talkin’‘.”

“A lot of girls go to pick up guys. Six months ago I was going downtown to get drunk and find my self a man...and sure enough I found myself a man.”

“I love going, I love being able to talk to everybody that I can run into that I know, I love the opportunity to be able to dress up in stuff that I can’t normally wear during the week. I am also single and it is always going to be something that is there. I go and look at guys who are also dressed up for one day of the week and say ‘Hey.’.”

C. DOWNTOWN DISLIKES

Participants were asked to comment on what they did not like about going downtown. Clearly, these young women go downtown for the same reasons as others. However, what should be a positive experience for women is sometimes unpleasant, challenging and disturbing. By far the greatest number of responses centred on:

- (i) the highly sexualized environment built upon our society’s and men’s sexist attitudes towards women.
- (ii) the unpleasant atmosphere of violence and excessive drinking.
- (iii) a chaotic and dirty physical environment.

i. Chaotic and Dirty Physical Environment

Some women said some bars, rather than being a place where they can go to relax, are crowded and uncomfortable.

“I fell on Sam Shades’ dance floor in the slush and beer and cigarette ashes... everyone is spilling beer.”

“..I mean, alcohol is great when they know what they can handle. When people are falling down on the dance floor and I can’t avoid stepping on a broken beer bottle and someone is puking up in the bathroom, you know, it doesn’t make it fun anymore..”

“Someone pissed on the dance floor while I was there, she was that drunk and she got kicked out. Just imagine falling in it.”

“I really don’t like it, although I like the Breezeway because it is not so crowded.”

“If you go down around 11:30, 12:00 it is completely different than at 3 o’clock when the lights come on. That’s when you see people staggering around, you see people leaving together, mascara running down their faces. Cop cars hauling people off. When you are not drinking it is very different, you see stuff how it really is.”

“There is more drugs and stuff downtown. There is less control downtown than at the Breezeway. You see things downtown that you wouldn’t see at the Breezeway. Like all these outrageous low prices for liquor and these contests, you don’t see that at the Breezeway. There is less control and therefore it is just too much sometimes and it leads to very bad things sometimes.”

ii. Excessive Drunkenness and Violence

Excessive and binge drinking is very common.

“My friend was loaded, the bar wasn’t open 2 hours and she must have slammed back the beer, just puked her guts up and they were calling her ‘skank’. She was there staring at me...she was looking straight past me, she didn’t recognize me, she didn’t know what she was doing, who she was. She was spitting at people..laughing. They kicked her out.”

“I used to go to the Majestic, where they had .99 cent specials. So people would go there for 3 hours and pound them back. Then they would go to Junctions and continue to drink when they shouldn’t have, because they were already drunk. It was all about getting drunk.”

“You get drunk and you get taken advantage of, or you take advantage of...it goes both ways. You don’t care when you are drunk, its just screw me or I’ll screw you. Your hormones goes mad..you are not shy. I go by myself and I leave by myself. I have never gotten so drunk that I have never been able to control it...but there was one incident where there was a guy, he must have been on dope too, turned into a vicious..guys can be violent, more than normal.”

Sometimes this drinking is linked to violence by men and women.

“I was at the hospital, there was a woman who came in, she was beaten up really badly, there was blood everywhere. She was into a fight down on George St. with these girls, she didn’t even know why...it’s pretty pathetic.”

“..A lot go to get drunk. If you see other people drunk and you are not drinking they look like idiots. You see people falling down, stupid fights happening in the middle of George street...people fought over 1 beer, come off it, its only beer. When the bars close, that’s when all the stuff happens. That is when everyone is drunkest, fighting over taxis.”

“Two of my best friends were down to Rob Roy’s. One missus came over and asked her for a cigarette and she said ‘no’ and this missus was really drunk, and my friend is right scawny, she

can't fight her way out of a paper bag...and two of them ended up hopping on her. She had her nose broken, she was in the hospital for about 4 months after that. Face beat off the concrete, there's still blood down there on the wall and everything...just over a friggin' cigarette, too."

"Downtown's gonna be downtown no matter where you are to. Even in little pubs it happens, too. I had an incident at Peter Easton's a few weeks ago. I just went down to play pool and then some guy followed me and my friend to a party. We kicked him out and then he wouldn't get out so I douted a cigarette on his head and then he punched me and I was knocked in a snow bank. He punched me."

iii. Sexualized Environment

Some women said they feel they have the right to express their sexuality in bars and feel men have the same right. However, they described the dominant bar environment as unhealthy. They spoke of male bar patrons' sexual objectification of them and other women.

"It's the jerks. The guys that come up and who automatically assume that since you are looking at them they can touch you and stuff like that ..if you dance with them you are theirs."

"Guys think that if a woman is downtown, automatically she is a slut, if she is wearing certain clothes."

"A lot of guys downtown, they will come up and ask you if you want to dance and if you say yes, some of them just get way too close. And you say yes to be nice and then they just go way too far. "Yah, like she danced with me, I'm taking her home."

Men of all ages are perpetrators of sexual harassment.

"Old men. They ask you to dance. They're in their 30's and 40's..."

"Everything downtown is about sex. I'd say that more than half of people who go downtown go to pick somebody up. Even if you have boyfriends or girlfriends. Like, married guys trying to pick up young girls."

"I don't like drunk old men, I find I have a phobia of old people downtown anyway. They kind of freak me out. It's like if someone my dad's age is hitting on me, that is pretty gross."

"Actually it's not only that, it's a lot of younger guys. After they get a few drinks in them ..he could be the shyest kinda guy, but they don't care what they say."

Young male bonding and competition for the attention of women commonly plays out as overly aggressive, violent behaviour.

“I go to school and in the smoke room and that is all they talk about...’I dragged this one home from George Street the weekend.’ When I hear that in the smoke room I just turn around and walk out.

They are a bunch of pigs.”

“The way guys act when they are loaded..they have no respect...they think women are objects and they can go do anything they want .”

“Oh, yah, their macho-ness comes out then.”

Alcohol is used by men as an instrument of control over women and as an excuse to be explicitly sexist in their language and actions.

“People pushing drinks at you..I don’t drink and people just try to force it, mostly guys, too.”

“They are like leeches when they are drunk..”

“They go down there to pick up girls...if they buy you drinks and get you drunk they think they can take you home, a lot of them do.”

Jane and Leona pointed out that not all men downtown have similar sexist attitudes towards women:

“Not all guys...I met my boyfriend on George Street and I have been going out with him on and off for 5 years.”

“Yah, and a lot of girls go to pick up guys, too. It’s not just guys.”

“Women can be just as bad as guys. Some girls go looking for relationships, some guys go looking for relationships, some girls go looking for sex, some guys go looking for sex.”

Bars intentionally create a sexualized environment. Some women suggest this contributes to the fact that people engage in sex inside bars and near bar premises.

“They even have the Rhino Room at Merlin’s. There is like one big dance floor and coffee tables and a couch here, couch there, and the bar and then you go up 4 stairs and there is like 2 beds and 2 pool tables. Two Queen size beds with leopard prints all over the walls. And mirrors and that. People go up there to make out for sure. There is a bouncer there...you wouldn’t go up there to have sex or anything. You go up there to sit and be quiet and talk, and, like stroke hair.”

“I bet people are there having sex downtown in bathrooms. “

“I am after walking into a bathroom and there were people in there having sex.”

“I saw 2 people in a car parked right across the street from Merlin’s having sex.”

“And outside in the alleys. By Junctions, you can go behind and go to the Zone. Oh, that alley is ridiculous. Somebody told me he walked by and some missus was giving head to some guy. How degrading, man, imagine a bunch of people see you getting out with a guy.”

Sara and Roberta talked about how the sexualized environment dictates what is socially acceptable dress for women in bars:

“..I always feel like I have to dress up just so. If I go to the Breezeway I can wear jeans and sneakers and I feel like myself and I feel comfortable but if you go downtown you gotta dress up and you’re always thinking, like ‘oh, god they are looking at me’. There are all these little girls down there all dressed up, and they would be like ‘oh, why is she here with sneakers on.’”

“The atmosphere is sexual. You wouldn’t go downtown in splash pants and sneakers and a sweatshirt, even though that is what you are most comfortable in. You wouldn’t wear your Sunday church clothes. You got a downtown wardrobe. Tank tops and tight pants, makeup and your hair is done. I always dress up. You are probably more comfy in something else, but you wear that anyway.”

D. BAR MARKETING

The women were asked to talk about how they see bar owners encouraging people to go to their bar. They described in detail different marketing practices including bar specials and sexual “contests” where contestants perform various feats for prizes of drinks or bar tabs. They stated clearly that these contests contribute greatly to the sexually charged atmosphere. Clearly, sex sells, and it sells better the more alcohol is involved. They say the strategy is to attract young women to the bar with extremely low prices. Men, who traditionally have more disposable income and a higher tolerance for alcohol, will frequent bars where there are young women.

i. Drink Specials

With such a high concentration of bars on George Street, competition for patrons is fierce. Tying discounted prices to sex, as with “Above the Knee, Drink for Free” makes the traditional “Ladies’ nights” seem boring and uncreative.

“Bars specials at the Blarney Stone...25 bucks for women to drink, 30 for men. All you can drink for that. You know why they do that is because the more women go there, the more men’s gonna go there...men usually drink more than women...so they are saying ‘OK, a lot of women’s going there...where do you think the men’s going.’”

“Ninety nine cent drinks at Bender’s Wednesdays. Thursday is Molson products, then Labatt’s; they have different promotions.”

“We’re not rich, can’t afford to drink everywhere...those 99 cent specials...they rule.”

“There was another one, something about cheap girls, or free girls, cheap guys. Free for girls, and 1.50 for guys. Because the guys are gonna come if the girls are in there drinking. And it takes girls for the most part, stereotypically less time to get drunk.”

Bars put effort into encouraging people inside the door at off peak times.

“Young girls wearing short skirts get to drink for free, so the boys can leer at them. Above the knee, drink for free, Sunday night at Turkey Joe’s, they encourage you to drink on Sunday.”

“My roommate said there was an ad in the paper for 5 cents a draught at Turkey Joe’s..it’s 25 cents now, 7 dollars cover. Monday night women drink free from 11-12..”

Tina spoke of how women get rewarded in unofficial ways for wearing revealing clothes that help increase the “sexual” environment of the bar, thus making more money and potentially improving the reputation of the bar among some men.

“If women wear skirts up half their knee..they drink for free..Merlin’s, Rob Roy on Thursday and Friday. Saturday ladies get 3 free drinks..but if you dress skimpy, guys will buy you drinks, you won’t get IDed, you sometimes don’t have to pay cover...I wear tank tops and I don’t have to pay cover.

ii. Sexual Contests

Participating women said that sexual contests were a prominent way bar owners lured patrons to the establishments. Designed to draw heterosexual men to their bars, these include the wet t-shirt contest, funnel contest, sexiest underwear contest, blind date contest, and various others. In a recent radio interview, a local bar manager said there is stiff competition among bars to attract and keep clients. These contests are “creative” ways to do this, she said.

Deb offered this overview of the contests:

“Then there is all this lovely, wet t-shirt, get the stick in the hole game. Who can get a condom on quickest, fake orgasm, put a condom on the toilet plunger. Vibrator races. They have a lot of contests, the worse one I find is the wet t-shirt contests...A lot more gets wet than your t-shirt and a lot more comes off than your t-shirt. Women have stripped to nothing or underwear. And the whole thing happens after bar specials from 9 to 11 with the contest at 12 or 1 when everybody is wasted. A friend of mine, we got loaded and she got into it and we had to get her out of it. The bar specials started at 9 and it was a ladies’ night. So women got cheaper drinks. I was wasted too, but I am just not into that. It was terrible, it was terrible. This bar had some pretty big prizes.”

Others described how the contests work:

“They have the funnel contest...where ya stick the funnel down your pants and it sticks out your zipper and you drink out of that. The funnel has a big tube that goes with it. The other person has to drink from there.”

“We used to go the big game Thursdays..I don’t know if they still have it. There would be 3 people up there, ask some kind of trivial question, like a really simple one. You have to do something provocative. This girl, she won for skipping rope. She was up there bouncing around.”

“At Brewskies. That night they got 3 guys up on stage, and 3 girls, it was like a blind date kind of thing. First it was the guys and 1 girl and she got to ask them all these questions like “what would you do with this...it got pretty kinky. Missus was blindfolded... the answers the fellas came up with was excellent. Yah, and whoever wins, they get a 25 dollar bar tab, and they go on the date.”

Patricia and Kelly talked about different variations on an “underwear contest”:

“Bender’s has the sexiest underwear one..there’s 3 girls, they drop their pants...you see their thong. Sexiest underwear wins.”

“Yah, but that is not the underwear contest, I’ve done that. At Bender’s you hand your underwear to the DJ. You go down to the washroom, take them off, hand them to the DJ. You can win a bar tab.”

Q: How do they pick the winner?

“They see which one is the best, which one they like the most. At first it was the DJ from Magic 97 and the other DJ.”

“In the summer... we were dancing in front of the DJ and he kept saying ‘Are you gonna come up, are you gonna come up?’ We were like ‘No, my underwear is staying on, I didn’t come down here to take off my clothes.’ And another thing he was doing was going around with this big water gun and squirting it in girls’ mouths. He was like ‘open your mouth’ and I said no. I had no idea what was in that thing. It could be anything.”

The wet t-shirt contest is perhaps the most well-known contest. All women were familiar with it, some had participated. In November, 2000 the local television station NTV did a news piece on this, documenting an actual live contest and interviewing patrons at the bar that night.

There were many interpretations of the wet t-shirt contest.

“Wet t-shirt contest at McMurdo’s, Benders, Junctions, and Brewskies. Girls put the t-shirt on and they get out the super soaker... and they, like, soak you down. They ask the crowd, and it can get pretty wild. On occasion it has been known for people to remove the wet t-shirt. And like, that can get kinda...nasty... you gotta watch what you are doing.”

“Yah, you are in McMurdo’s, this is not the Picadilly, keep your clothes on please.”

Lara shared her experience of participating in a wet t-shirt contest:

“I was in the wet t-shirt contest, I won a bar tab. I was definitely glad I did once but it is not something I would do twice. The experience was weird. I made a friend out of it. The girl who got up with me...it was a definite experience and it was good, but, like, the crowd, they are crazy. I wasn’t intoxicated, but I had consumed alcohol beverages. I went up there and I made a friend, the whole bar was full of people I knew. So it was a big old, ‘You’re not gonna do this, you’re not gonna do this, it was more than a dare than anything else. I didn’t feel uncomfortable, I didn’t feel totally comfortable.” Me and this other girl at the contest we split the prize because the crowd couldn’t decide. It was going smack for smack and we were just having fun with it, I mean, we didn’t really care, we weren’t out to prove anything. I wasn’t doing it because I wanted to attract some guy in the corner or offend that group over there, it was just like a dare thing, and its just more of a memory, like you’re gonna kick yourself after.”

Elaine stopped going to a favourite bar of hers because of the wet t-shirt contest:

“That drove me out of Junctions on Wednesday nights, ‘cause me and my friends were hard core Wednesday nighters. I went away for 2 weeks, it’s Wednesday night, we go, and all of a sudden there are naked girls, and there are a lot of skeety guys. I couldn’t see anything cause the guys were literally hanging off the rafters up one the deck. ‘Cause you can climb up on the sides of the windows. So I couldn’t see a damn thing, I was just sitting drinking my beer. And then my friend said, ‘oh my god, she is taking her shirt off.’ The same girl who had won the week before was back - returning champion and she decided she was going to make it easier to disrobe. What she had done was make a slit in the top of her shirt so she didn’t have to work at ripping it off she could just go...it was easier to rip off. Because what they do at Junctions is provide you with a shirt because they are so considerate. They are like ‘Oh, don’t tear your own shirt, tear ours. You didn’t plan on it, and now you are drunk, we’ve got a t-shirt for you.’ It’s great. They are always looking out for the girls. It is the cheapest white cotton t-shirt you could imagine. It’s almost paper. It’s got a little colour on the side here, so each girl can have her own colour, it’s quite classy.”

The women were asked whether or not they felt women were pressured into participating in the contests, and views varied:

Some women said male bar patrons and staff expect and coerce women to participate.

“We were dancing at Bender’s and they were like ‘get ready to get on stage!’ We got on stage and they were like ‘Show us those underwear!’ We were like ‘What?!’ And we just jumped off the stage, see ya! Had someone not known, and been bold enough to jump off stage, they may have ended up doing it.”

“Well the guys are at the side yelling ‘Show us your tits, show us your tits’, and it’s like, fuck, b’y, open a book. Go to the Picadilly. I swear to God they never heard of a magazine.”

“The people that I saw were all types. My friend was in it, she is like me, pretty laid back. But you get into this thing, you are really drunk and the crowd is going wild. They are egging you on, they are saying all these things. You go a bit further than you would sober.”

Other women pointed out that entering the contests is a woman’s choice.

“No, if you want to do it nobody forces you to do it. For the underwear contests there’s girls and guys that does that. Even guys done the wet t-shirt contest just to make a joke out of it. And you can say no, anyway.”

“It’s not like anyone is forcing you. It’s not everybody in the club, like they are telling everybody in the club, pointing you out saying “you guys gotta do this, you guys gotta do that.”

“They might do that to some girls, though, they’re like ‘You come up, and then everybody’s like, ‘Whew, come up, come up..go up, go up yah, yah.’

“But most of the time you sign up for it, you sign the little sheet, you have the choice of whether you do it or not. But most people want to do it for the bar tab. Twenty-five dollars, that’s 25 beer. To show your boobs.”

Sharon and Paula spoke of how young people with limited incomes have few choices in which bars they go to, and how particular bars target the young and/or student market.

“I haven’t gone to a whole lot of raunchy things. I have gone to ‘above the knee drink for free’, we are students, and sometimes money is a problem. You can’t just choose to go to the Duke or the Ship. I haven’t worn a skirt, but my friends have. Even though we have choices in life, sometimes we don’t have a choice, and it’s just a way to get you in there.”

“These people are adults, but still it creates an atmosphere. And it is targeted towards young students. It is very, very cheap. You can’t afford to pay \$4 bucks a beer. You could be drinking for free.”

Jeanne felt what was exploitative to women that the media did a story on the wet t-shirt contests.

“It was on the news. I don’t think they should have had it on the news, it is embarrassing.”

Some women felt that there was no harm in the contests. Groups discussed the fact that some bars also have “wet boxer short” contest for men.

“I never done none of them. If I was loaded, loaded I would do it... It must work - it draws a crowd, there are people who want to see it, and do it.”

Joan did not think the wet boxer short contest paralleled the wet t-shirt contest for women, as the boxer shorts were not as revealing as the t-shirts.

“What I don’t think is fair, is that when they have the wet t-shirt contest they have the guys up there in boxers contest. And that is supposed to be the equivalent. I think it is absolutely ridiculous, how is a guy up there with boxer shorts down to his knees equivalent to a woman with her breasts flying in the wind? Wet and visible for everyone. It was in response to women’s concerns about it. We are not sexist, we are gonna have a wet boxers contest. So the boys would come up and they would be sprayed down. Really dark material. That was their way of saying, we are not sexist. It is not equivalent, it is not even close. It’s walking down the road in the summer time.”

Many women felt the contests create a dangerous environment for women downtown. Some said they help to perpetuate negative societal attitudes about women in general.

“They are trying to draw people in. And then once you are in there, the clientele it attracts , the males, they hit on you more. Like they have a right to hit on you. Females provided for you. Or they feel like they have a right. If you are wearing a short skirt. Or if you are in the wet t-shirt contest. Females are provided for them. Automatically you are fair game. You were up there and stripped, you are coming home with me and strip. That is the mentality. That is what I think these things cause, these sexual contests.”

“It’s exploitation to women. I am saying for the women doing it it’s exploitation, I mean I guess it is still their choice to do it but it is still exploitation.”

Fiona talked about how this exploitation can have negative repercussions for women inside and outside of bars.

“Obviously the men don’t make the women get up there and do it, they do it on their own for personal reasons or for the tab. So then you have all these guys who are like, excited . They think this is great. So they leave the bar and say me and my friend are walking down the road and we have no idea - we weren’t even at the same bar, we weren’t anywhere near it - so all of sudden they are all fired up from looking at naked women. So even though we were not there, we had no part of it, its almost like, we are kind of victims of what they have done. I’m not saying it’s the women’s fault or men’s fault , but it the whole societal thing. When they leave that bar, what is in their heads about what they are allowed to do.”

“With the wet t-shirt contest...a girl chooses to go downtown and show off her breasts. Does that mean it is OK for a guy to put his hands on them after, is it OK for a girl to feel she has the right to get up there and show her breasts? At one point, I think, ‘oh my god how degrading, that exploits women.’ And then I think, there are actually women who are getting up there doing that. And at what point do we say that it is wrong.”

Dawn talked insightfully about how bar owners capitalize on the fact that wet t-shirt contests are a “cultural phenomenon” in our society.

“I think there is this whole aura or mystique type thing built around wet t-shirts. For lack of a better

term, it is a cultural phenomenon. You don't hear of guys getting their boxers wet. It's not equivalent in that way. But you have this whole build-up to women and wet t-shirts. Well we all know what happens when girls are in college and they get wet t-shirts, it's a big party. Girls have a little more sense. Guys are more like "Tits, yah! They just freak out when there is a set of tits in their face." They lose their minds. It's about what society is saying is acceptable. I mean look at tv, look at videos. Women are totally exploited in my opinion in pop culture big time. Society is saying this is OK. When it comes down to what happens in the bars, it is just a much bigger problem. Things like date rape."

E. SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND BARS

The women were asked to comment on whether they or another woman they know have been in a situation in the context of a bar when she felt unsafe. This broad question prompted many stories of women's experiences of sexual violence, including intimidation, sexual harassment, and sexual assault within and in the close environment of bars.

i. Intimidation and Control

Alison and Rose spoke about men's jealousy and the competition and among men vying for the attention of women downtown. Alison felt she was being controlled by her ex-boyfriend. Women also spoke of the challenging experience of going downtown with their boyfriends.

"I was broke up with my boyfriend about 2 weeks and we went downtown to Brewskies and I was dancin' with this fella and he cut between both of us and said 'That's my girlfriend', and I was like 'No, now, we are broke up, so, come on.' And he was there tellin' all his friends, 'Don't go near her, don't go near her that's my girlfriend, that's my girlfriend.' And not one fella would come and dance with me. I had to like, go get a bouncer to tell him to stay away from me. The fellas were afraid of what would happen. He is really a jealous type, like, you don't understand, he is really nasty for that."

"There was a guy who came up to me after, and he said, 'If I do a back flip would that impress you?' And I said 'Do it and find out'. And he done a back flip and I danced with him and he was the happiest guy in the world. He's like 'It's my birthday', 'Thank you', and I'm like 'Ok'. He's like 'I love you'. The guys just get all weird."

"Excited". And if you are down with your boy friend they get so emotional."

"They are really jealous, emotional like."

"Downtown is not a place to go with your boyfriend. I want to be up dancing with guys, not dancing with him the whole night."

“You should be able to do that anyway.”

“With some guys you can.”

Amy shared her experience with a man who tried to intimidate her into talking to him.

“I was down to Liquid Ice, this guy came over to me, I was totally revolted by him, I just wouldn’t talk to him. He was like, ‘What’s your name?’. If you don’t talk to them at all, like I just stood there and I totally stared him down. He said, ‘If you tell me to fuck off and leave you alone I will be happy.’ He just wanted very much to engage, it’s that trap, once you start talking to them, then they will be on your ass. And he was like to his friend, ‘Oh, get this chick, she won’t even say anything’, blah blah blah. I just walked away from him, I just couldn’t even bring myself to talk to him. And like, he turned around and started bad mouthing me.”

“They don’t know anyway else to approach ladies. They make you mad and they make it OK and then by chance you might have this weird relationship or something.”

ii. Sexual Harassment

Several women described incidents of verbal insults, pressure to remove clothing, and having men follow them.

“I did something I am embarrassed about at the Battery. We were all loaded, we had the bathroom full of beer. Anyways, we were in the bathroom at the Battery Hotel. Georgie Finton had this camera and me and two other girls was gonna strip. I was shaking, I was scared, I said “No, no”. So I just I hauled down my pants, showed them my thong and my tattoo. I was so loaded, I was embarrassed when I did it and I will never ever do it again, because when I seen myself do it I was like “Oh, my god.” That’s not me, I’m not like that. I am really self conscious about myself and I just hauled up my shirt and bra and everything and then that was it. I never, like, got buck naked or anything, I just hauled up my bra and shirt. And Finton went around showing everybody. It was on video, and I would never do that again.”

“It depends on where I go because some bars it’s so fucking gross...you get these fucking guys. Oh, the guys are so ignorant, it ain’t funny, man. Oh, my god, I’m after having a lot of guys come up and say the nastiest things, I don’t even wanna...They are so ignorant, they got no respect for ladies or girls. ‘Come one, baby, I takes you home and shows you a good time, and they gets on with their bullshit. And the old men.”

“This guy was hitting on me, and I went to leave and he, like, followed me out the cab. He asked me if he could come home with me.”

“I was dancing one time, I swear to god this guy it was like, he was trying to hook my leg, it was so funny. I just took off to the bathroom.”

Rebecca talked about being followed around a bar:

“Me and my friend went down not last weekend but the weekend before and there were these 2 guys were chasing us around. They weren’t doing anything, they weren’t touching us or anything, but everywhere we went they were there. And they would kind of like corner us and they’d talk and we’d be like, well we have to go to the bathroom and we would run away. It is hard to do what you want when you have a guy or 2 guys trailing behind you all the time. We weren’t interested in, them it is not like we were trying to hook up with them. So that is annoying, when you got someone bugging you.”

iii. Acquaintance Rape and Sexual Assault

In keeping with statistics on sexual assault, many of the incidents women described were perpetrated by men they knew or were acquainted with.

“Many times. I went downtown one night..me and my Mom. I was hanging out with someone I’ve known for almost a year. And he asked if I wanted to back to his house and have some drinks...like I said, I’ve known him for a year, I’ve been over to his house before. And he and his buddy tried to rape me in his room...and I called a cab.”

Lisa points out how women and men are differently affected by sexual violence.

“It’s more unsafe for women. I don’t want to make it sound like, well, you drink to a point where you don’t know what you are doing and you go down with a group of 5 or 6 people and all of a sudden you are by yourself. I went down one night, it was the end of term. I had been stressed out all week, tired, not eating enough, I didn’t even have that much to drink. I got completely tanked to the point where I got kicked out of the bar. All my friends, they had all left me, I was there by myself. I had blackouts that night, I still don’t remember everything that happened. Anyone, some guy who is out on the prowl, looking for someone vulnerable, he could have picked me up, took me home and did what ever he wanted to me and I never would have known. And somebody did, but it turned out it was a friend of mine and he took me home, took my contacts out, put me in bed, and didn’t try anything. That could have very easily been a different man. And there are guys down there who will do that. But a girl is not going to do that to a guy. Chances are. It is different. A man wouldn’t be in danger if a woman hauled him off in a cab if she was completely out of it, but a woman could be in danger. It’s partly a size thing, and a man can rape a woman. I can see a man defending himself more. Men do that, you don’t hear of women rapists.”

Chris said sexual assault by men you know is more difficult to deal with, as the betrayal of trust by a friend is unexpected.

“I think a lot of people think that if they are with people they know that they are more safe. My friend was telling me about a friend of a friend. The way NF is you know so many people and a lot of us grew up in little tiny places where everybody’s friends since you were kids. And she was really,

really drunk and this guy she has known since she was a little girl, like 5 or whatever said, well I will take you home cause you are really drunk. So he took her home. She passed out along the way when they were walking down the street and he dragged her and put her in the truck and went to take her home. She started to come to, what brought her to was the sound of a horn. When she came to she realized it was her forehead up against the horn making the noise and he was behind her sexually assaulting her. This is someone she had grown up in a little community, someone she grew up with someone she trusted. So if you can't trust someone you have known since childhood you certainly can't trust strangers. And when I hear about my own friends going home with strangers it is scary. We got another friend that does that all the time. You don't realize the potential for danger when you are drinking. All the time means every time you go out. Not just every now and then. And blackouts that they can't remember like going to someone's house and waking up and not knowing how they got there and stuff like that."

"I was downtown New Year's to a bar with a friend of mine and her cousin did a lot of things that I didn't necessarily want to happen. I ended up losing a friend, well, almost losing a friend. There was a big strain on our friendship because of it...because, like it's in the process of going to court and she had to testify and.."

"There was one time me and my friend was leaving a club and we were walking down George Street and we saw this guy, my friend knew him, well, knew his friend,...and he grabbed me, literally grabbed me and pinned me up against the wall saying 'I'm taking you home with me..you are going home with me.' I said 'no, I'm not, I gotta go, my boyfriend is over there, even though I didn't have a boyfriend at the time. He was freaking me right out..afterward he let me go and I jumped a cab."

"I would go out drinking with myself and like 8 guys in a field yah, that is a smart move, in a field, in the woods, at someone's house. I didn't care. I thought, nothing would happen to me, these are my friends. Until the night I woke up and one of my best friend's hands was up my shirt."

Tracy, a woman from a rural community in Newfoundland, suggested the bar environment is less safe in St. John's than at home, where people are more apt to look out for each other.

"Last summer, I had a horrible night, I never went downtown for 6 months. This guy from home was someone I have known ever since junior high. The whole night he was chasing me around he wouldn't leave me alone. He told me he wanted to have sex with me ever since junior high, and he was leaving at the end of the summer and I might never see him again. This was my only chance. He was so persistent. He had me out at Peddler's, he had me cornered and was trying to kiss me. I got really upset and I had to go find someone to say get me away from him. At one point he threw me up against a wall and stuck his tongue in me. I almost started to cry, I was so upset. We left early. That was June and I didn't go downtown until October or November. It just disgusted me so much. And it really made me mad because it was someone I knew. And he was saying what he wanted to do to me, like really graphic. I think guys you know think they can get away with it more. And it strikes you harder, too. When it is a stranger you are like, go on, leave me alone and usually they will leave you alone but then you got those few who just persist. When it's someone you know it would happen here more than at home because downtown no one really cares in St. John's; 1000

people in the bar if it was at home someone would help you. Out home, there are no strangers.”

Brigitte and Carolyn discussed how some men take advantage of women who agree to dance with them.

“Guys chasing you around and touching you, harassment, totally. You just can’t dance with a guy anymore without bumping and grinding and hands up the back of your shirt.”

“You get up with guys, you’re like, OK, I’ll dance with you, and they get this funky chicken move. Fellas would like, touch you all over, you’re trying to push them away, give them the idea but you know they are behind you trying to hump the ass off you.”

“Yah, a lot of people, like, touch your ass, and they’re like, ‘oops, sorry’ and brush by you again. It’s like, 5 times that happened to me.”

iv. Sexual Violence by Older Men

Participants described many incidents of sexual harassment by older men. This harassment was particularly disturbing for some, as many of the men were the age of their fathers and it is much less expected. While sexual attention from young men is sometimes flattering to some young women, attention from older men is threatening.

“I had a guy follow me one time. He followed me right around the bar, shaking my hand saying ‘Hi, what’s your name...he was like 50 and he was buying me drinks...I didn’t know it was him buying me drinks, I thought it was a young guy. He said I bought you all those drinks and you won’t even talk to me.”

“Yah, older men come up to the bar and probably put their hand on your ass and pretend that they don’t mean it... ‘Oh, excuse me’, they say. Mostly it’s older men who do that, brush up against you.”

“I hate the way..I have a lot of guys hitting on me asking me to dance..before you know it , they are touching you and trying to kiss you. I even had 1 guy, he was about 40 years old, he proposed to me.”

“Smelly people, fucking bastards who wrap their arms around you and are breathing on you.”

“Dirty old men..they come over and sit next to you, ‘Oh, sorry, did I touch you?’”

“I was at Bender’s and there was this old guy and he was just standing there at the bar and he would see someone and go over and start huggin’ them, loaded.”

“I find, downtown there are a lot of older people, like older men, and that just grosses me out. You don’t like old men looking at you. There are different types of old men. There are those who are

there for the music and then there are dirty old men. I was at Trapper's one night. There was an older guy there who was obviously so loaded, he should have been cut off hours before. He wouldn't stop touching me, and backing me into corners. My male friend had to say to him 'She is my girlfriend, leave her alone.'"

"I went downtown with this guy and he was so embarrassed. His dad was down there. This 55 year old guy..he looked over and his dad had 2 young girls on each arm, they couldn't have been more than 17,18."

"I was down there and I was dancing and there was an old man, he was just so very irritating, he would two- step around everybody. He kept coming right over next to me and keep bumping into me. I came face to face. And I was like 'What is your problem!' I just had enough of him, I saw this guy a lot and he always used to do it. So we started yelling at each other...the bouncer had to remove him. He was just trying to be an asshole, he knew he was aggravating me, he was enjoying the attention."

"I don't like drunk old men, I find I have a phobia of old people downtown anyway. They kind of freak me out. It's like is someone my dad's age is hitting on me, that is pretty gross."

"That's what I said when this fella was trying to take me home, and I know this fella right, and he was way older than me. I was like 'No, I got a youngster at home and my mother said to be home as soon as the bars close or she'll kill me.' I was trying every which way to get out of it. I was fighting with him for an hour trying to get out of it. I was like, I'm sorry I ain't going home with you!"

F. SOCIETY'S ROLE IN MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

i. Bar Staff and Male Patrons

While one would expect bar procedure and policies would work to ensure the safety of its patrons, most of the women who spoke described male bar staff as contributing to the sexual and other violence that happens in bars. Fewer women commented that some bar staff feel a sense of responsibility for safety. Some male patrons as well, they said, understand the specific dangers downtown brings for women and can also be allies.

"Yah, bouncers...bouncers. If they do a favour for you, they want you to do a favour for them. Bouncers are all male sluts."

"Managers are the same. One manager brought me up in the room got me drunk, gave me free drinks, so many times, and asked me to put my hand on his dick but I got away from him every time."

Two women talked about how they felt bouncers sometimes abuse their power and use excessive

force when dealing with patrons.

“I was at the Cornerstone, I wasn’t even drunk, I was just being a little loud, and this bouncer kicked me out. I went out on George St. and this cop came over and talked to me. I told him I was kicked out for no reason ...just because I was talking loud. The cop followed me back in...I didn’t mean to rat on him, but he looked at me and said ‘You are dead.’ Threatened me, looked at me so hard...I haven’t been near that place ever since.”

“Bouncers put a guy in the hospital. He had him down, he was kicking the shit out of him. He got him down on the ground and he was beating him. I was looking and he was like ‘If you don’t fucking mind your own business.’”

“They got power over...they work down there long enough and they think they own everything.”

Adrienne’s point about the need to “get in good” with bouncers suggests that they may be subjective when watching out for patrons’ safety.

“It depends , if you get in good with the bouncers, then you’re alright. They even have them up by dance bar, to keep an eye on what is going on, who is hitting on who.”

Pam, who works at a bar, said it is sometimes difficult to have empathy for difficult patrons.

“If you are a worker downtown at a bar and people are loaded and getting on your nerves, and they are barfing, you don’t care who they go home with, you just want them out of your face. That is true.”

Some women said that bar staff can be allies in limiting people’s alcohol intake and kicking abusive people out.

“Even bouncers seeing you starting to get tipsy...falling down, they kick you out, woman or man.”

“I was up to the Edge one time, I had to get the bartender to kick this old guy out, he wouldn’t leave me alone. I was sitting at the bar drinking, I didn’t want to leave, I was pretty happy, this old guy wouldn’t leave me alone he was bugging me, he was gone.”

Three women spoke of how sometimes male patrons can be helpful to women.

“There are some really good guys down there. I know a lot of people, they get in a bad situation, a lot of times there would be a guy that would help remove you from the situation.”

Yah, like this one time a fella tried to take me home and this other fella came over and he is always sticking up for me like “No, that’s my sister or that’s my cousin and you’re not touching her.” He is always there for me and I loves it. That’s why I got no problem with Brewskies. Even if it’s a guy you don’t know, and a guy sees another guy harassing a girl, he will come up and say, hey, man, leave her alone, she don’t wanna go with you.”

“I had a friend, she got so drunk. The bar cut her off. This guy said , ‘You know what? I am sober, I will take her home.’ She had her address, and the guy ended up taking her home and handing her over to a person at her house . Maybe she assumed she knew him, but she didn’t. Luckily, the guy was nice, and brought her home. Rang the doorbell. They handed her over to someone.”

ii. Alcohol and other Date Rape Drugs

Participants discussed the role of alcohol in sexual violence. All women described a definite connection between sex and alcohol in decreasing both men’s and women’s sexual inhibitions. While some emphasized the role of alcohol in impeding women’s judgement, others express frustration with the onus on women to keep themselves safe. Women were not asked explicitly about their knowledge of date rape drugs. However, it is interesting to note that only two older women in the context of a university discussed date rape drugs as a safety concern for women. This may suggest that knowledge of date rape drugs among younger women is limited.

Jeannette suggested that if women chose to drink, they must accept the consequences.

“Guys are hornier. Guys don’t think with that head they think with the other head. Same with half the girls down there...when they don’t think with their head they think with their cunt. But if the girls are stupid enough when they are drunk to get with the guys, but the guys are drunk too so why wouldn’t they ...but it’s not really the guys taking advantage of the girls if they are drunk so they are both drunk...it’s like they are taking advantage of each other.”

Joan continued:

“There’s a definite connection. Because you are more vulnerable when you are drinking. They find themselves getting into situations they usually wouldn’t get into if they were sober, so they just don’t have as much judgement as they would.”

Anne Marie talked about how alcohol decreases a woman’s inhibitions and ability to respond to potential violence:

“I am a stubborn person when I am drunk. There have been times when I have been with a guy at a bar and my friends have come up to me, and said “Anne Marie, do you know what you are doing? And I’ll be ‘Yup, I am fine, I am excellent. Don’t worry about me, just leave me alone.’ I don’t know what I am doing. I am having a slobbery make out session on the dance floor, and my friends are like, ‘What is that?’ And I don’t know. It is not something I am proud of, who doesn’t go out and get drunk on a fairly regular basis and come back with some horror story about who they have gotten with? Sometimes things happen, and alcohol is a date rape drug. You have to really be careful out there.”

Janet talked about naming a sexual assault that happened to her on a dance floor and not being taken

seriously.

“I had a guy who was drinking with some of my friends come up to me while I was dancing. He started dancing behind me, and proceeded to grab my crotch. I pushed him away and he fell down. He got up, came over, and did it again! I’m like, what are you doing?! I pushed him away, he fell down again, and I’m like, OK, he is not going to do it again. He comes back and tries to pull my skirt up over my head. So I went and told his friends, and they were like ‘Oh, he didn’t do that, he is just drunk.’... I have been accosted downtown so many times. I was accosted by a guy downtown that I keep seeing here at MUN.”

Two women discussed how alcohol is used by men to get women drunk for the purposes of assault, and as such, should be seen as a date rape drug. One woman talked about how date rape drugs take away any potential of women successfully warding off an attacker. The other expressed frustration with the emphasis some parts of society put on women to “take care of themselves” so as to not fall victim to date rape drugs.

“And then there is the date rape drugs. And whether or not you want to believe it they are here. I think they are everywhere.”

“That is a fair assumption.”

“Alcohol is easier to deal with than something that is colourless, odourless, and tasteless and that is out there, without a doubt. Men are not as concerned with it, I suppose they can be, but to us, it is a bigger problem. It is a very big problem. It was only few years ago that the RCMP recognized it was a problem. This drug being brought into Canada. Until they seized this big shipment in Vancouver, it was not seen as a problem. They didn’t want to accept what has been happening to women for a long time..”

“You can’t pick a bar and say they are here. You can’t say who has them. Most of the responsibility falls to females. Just being a female you have to take care of yourself, being drunk you have to take care of yourself, trying to stay with your friends, making sure you don’t keep an open bottle around. Or, let someone else buy you a drink. All of a sudden, what should be a really enjoyable social experience turns into this huge responsibility. I mean, date rape drugs? Alcohol is a date rape drug.”

G. WOMEN’S RESPONSE TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Focus group participants described a number of ways in which they deal with the sexual violence they experience downtown. Some women feel that to go downtown means to expect and accept the old ‘boys will be boys’ adage, while also developing resilience to violence through finely tuned strategies and communication skills. Other women denounced the abuse by men and emphasized the societal barriers to naming and confronting sexual violence in bars.

i. Survival Strategies

Confrontation

Two women discussed how they deal with sexual assault by ignoring and confronting male aggressors.

“I find a lot of the time men will ask you out to dance and they figure they can hold you tight and touch you and you try to get away and there is nothing you can do.”

“There is actually something you can do: yell ‘Get your hands off me!’”

“When a guy asks you to dance, you assume he is interested in you. If a guy is harassing me I just ignore him or run away or say something to him.

“I was in a situation where that don’t work...I even told him to get the “f” off me. And it doesn’t work.”

“That is when you kick him in the nuts and say: ‘Now!’. I flip. I flip out.”

“Sometimes I will be like, no, I am here with my friends and they will just keep going at it. And then at a certain point you just want to say ‘fuck off.’”

You try to be nice, and say no in the nicest possible way, but sometimes you just blow up, and say ‘Get him the fuck away from me!’”

“I let it go. “One night I was down to Rob Roy’s and I was leaning against the railing on the dance floor and this old man came up and he grabbed my ass...and I was like, ‘Oh my god he’s got his hand on my ass, and I was like, ‘Get away from me, get away from me.’ And there was this guy on the other side and I was like ‘Help me, get this guy away from me, now.’ I was screaming. He just walked away. I used to be scared to say something.”

Lying

Other women deflect unwanted male attention by lying, telling them they are lesbians or that they already have a boyfriend.

“A lot of times when I am down with a girl, I just tell guys they we are together, lesbians.”

“I told one guy at Sam Shades that I was gay, and went up and hugged my friend.”

“I’m after telling so many fellas, ‘Look, my boyfriend is over there.’”

Wearing the “Right” Clothes

The women felt it was a woman’s responsibility to keep herself safe by dressing “appropriately” downtown. Two indicated that if a woman wears revealing clothing, she is responsible for unwanted sexual attention and perhaps assault, suggesting that the problem lies in the women’s poor decision-making rather than in men’s attitudes which see provocative dress as an invitation to assault.

“If you wore a shirt and you fold it up like this, then they think, ‘She wants to go with someone tonight, so maybe I will take her home.’”

“They are not gonna get respect, they will have a lot of guys wanting to take them home, but they are not gonna get respect by dressing like that.”

Q: Would you say it’s a woman’s fault in that case if she gets harassed?

“Sometimes.” “To a certain point.” “Couldn’t say it’s all girls, but it’s not all men either.”

Lateral Hostility

Some of the younger focus group participants expressed anger and loathing for other women whose actions they perceived to attract negative male attention. Their hostile use of words like ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ can be seen as an act of self-contempt, striving to distance these women from themselves and improve their own status vis-a-vis men on the bar scene. Sadly, these women being able to survive the bar scene can involve tacit acceptance of the restrictions and sexual control put on females.

“It’s the way you dress. If you wear no clothes you know they are gonna come over to you. If you dress like a whore you are gonna get attention.”

“The way girls are downtown, it’s disgusting.”

“It was disgusting. I was absolutely appalled. She had this little thing on, and shoes, and she was fucking around like a fish out of water. And even guys were walking past her and grimacing.”

“It’s like, when you go down, you see certain girls, and being a girl and looking at something like that, and knowing that’s exactly why guys go down there...it’s awful.”

“I was down to Brewskies and there was missus walking around with her bra and her shirt, like...She was on the floor, her and her friend and they were shaking their boobs at each other and everything, it was so disgusting. And the way the guys are down at Brewskies they are not like, ‘Oh, come on baby, I’ll take you home.’ They are polite fellas at Brewskies. That is why I like the bar, the guys aren’t pricks or assholes. And they never got no attention, people were yelling at them ‘Get off the dance floor you whores.’ Not one fella went up to them and started dancing with them. If that was any other bar there would have been 1500 fellas lined up waiting for them.”

Tara describes her disdain for a woman from whom she has disassociated herself.

“I know a girl, she is after taking at least 10-15 guys home with her. Friday, Saturday night she will end up taking 2 cab loads of people back to her house, and ends up at one of their houses. She is a big whore, basically. She remembers it, but she will say she don’t but she will. She will say bits and pieces of it. She laughs about it, she’s lost a lot of friends over it. They don’t want to hang around with her because of how she gets on downtown. She makes me look like a big slut downtown and I am not a slut downtown, I am not a slut. I don’t want to be associated with her..”

This “lateral hostility” against other young women described here unfortunately serves to perpetuate the sexual subordination of women and limit the development of understanding and solidarity among them.

Judy expressed a different opinion, that what a woman chooses to wear is not a justification for harassment:

“There are certain messages that certain people don’t really get like, just because I have a condom, doesn’t mean I want to have sex, just because I am wearing a tight shirt, doesn’t mean ...When I go out, I wear clothes that are tight because I feel comfortable, I like how I look in those things. And guys can look all they want, as long as they don’t feel that just because I am wearing that that they have the right to have a hand session with it. There are these little messages that people aren’t getting.”

When He Won’t Give Up

A group of women discussed the role of communication in dealing with sexual advances from men. Women expressed difficulty in saying ‘no’ in the face of potential danger and frustration with men who do not take ‘no’ for an answer. Sexual attention can also be flattering for some women, if their sense of self esteem is linked to male perceptions of them.

“Communication is a big thing, too. Because you go downtown to meet people. You do. When you are under the influence of alcohol and a guy is trying to take you home, he is being flattering and a lot of girls don’t know how to get out of it. Once you start talking to him it is really difficult to all of a sudden put up a guard, like, ‘Oh, you’re nice but I don’t want to sleep with you.’”

“You feel like you owe him something, but you know you don’t but you still can’t help but feel bad and you ask yourself, why should I feel bad?”

“Yah, if I guy picks you up downtown and he puts on the impression he likes you, if he likes you enough then he will wait. He won’t just try to take you home that night.”

“I was downstairs in Benders and I saw my friend leave with this guy, right. And, like, I didn’t know what she was doing, it was not like her at all, she had a boyfriend and everything. But, she’s one of these really shy girls who gets very intimidated. And the guy was rather big. She is just a little

girl. So I walk out of the bar and I'm like, 'Vicky, where are you going, where are you going?' And she was like, she just had this look on her face like she was going to drop dead from a heart attack any second. And I was like, I looked at him and said 'Where do you think you are taking her?' I said, 'I don't think so.' I grabbed her by the arm and took her back into the bar. I was like, 'Vicky, you can't be doing that...She said 'Well, I didn't know what to do, I couldn't say anything. He said all this good stuff.' I told him it was girls' night out."

"I tried that one, 'I am here with all the girls, I am not here with you. Leave me alone.' Sometimes they don't leave you alone, they just keep at it."

"But with Vicky, she had left the bar; he wouldn't accept no for an answer, she felt so intimidated by him. In order to not be hurt right away...I had to follow her, I wonder what would have happened to her. She just felt so trapped."

Tara suggests self awareness and assertiveness as crucial communication skills for women downtown.

"You know what the assumption is gonna be if you are dressed a certain way. You gotta know how to be unapproached ...if someone comes up to you and you know initially that you don't want them near you. You should be able to know right away how to get out of that situation. Cause there are a lot of people who don't know how to get out of it. Awareness. Self awareness. How to give off signals, maybe not so much verbal, appropriate signals that you don't want to be near this person. Assertiveness, how to go about doing that. Be educated."

ii. Younger Women and Harassment

Many women talked about how dealing with unwanted sexual advances is much more difficult for very young women, as they don't yet 'know the ropes' and are lacking in skills required to navigate downtown culture.

Three women said they didn't confront unwanted sexual advances out of fear of reprisal.

"I was like that when I first started going downtown and fellas would just come up to you.. I'd be afraid to say something cause I thought they might flip out and go after you. Now I don't care."

"For someone 17-18 years old it is completely different. I can go down now and I know I can handle myself, but when I was 18-19 it was completely different, I was afraid. I was always nervous. I would handle things differently."

"When I first started going downtown, the first bar I went to was Merlin's. I thought it was excellent because it was my first bar. There was these fellas coming up to us left right and centre and it was my first time downtown, so I was frightened to death. I was frightened to even talk to fellas, I was afraid they would try something on me, I was afraid I would get too drunk and go home with someone."

They said that sometimes young women who are unaware of their rights and lack assertiveness skills are coerced into sexual experiences with men who take advantage of their “newness” to downtown.

“Young girls who are just after turning nineteen, it’s sad. Cause they think it is going to be such a great experience and the next thing you know...they don’t know how to get on, b’y, a lot of them don’t. They will never admit it, that that is not something they wanted because that just makes them look that much less experienced in the bar scene. They end up getting a reputation. They become it, you fulfill it.”

“I’d be afraid I was being rude. I don’t like to be rude.”

“There a lot of young women, like 15, 16 some of the stories that came out..”

“Young women don’t know their rights or don’t have the skills. A lot of people brush it off, you were drunk, you are overreacting, I have heard people say that. Maybe I was flirting and he got the wrong idea.”

Ellen and Brenda shared strategies that they and their friends have developed to help each other be safe.

“Me and my friends have a big buddy system. We cab it together home, whoever is last out of the cab has to call the others as soon as they get it. We try to stay awake waiting for the phone call. If one of us goes missing, everyone is out looking. One of my friends disappeared one night and we all got pretty freaked out. We did find her, she was OK.”

“We are having a self defense course here at MUN..”

H. BARRIERS TO REPORTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN BARS

Generally speaking, less than 1 in 7 women report violent incidents to the police. That rate may be lower in the highly sexualized, violent context of bars. Women receive many messages about why violence happens to them. It was her fault she was assaulted because she flirted with the guy. He was drunk and didn’t know what he was doing. When women feel empowered to report the violence, embarrassment or fear of further danger may stop her.

Societal Tolerance

Erica and Marlene said that there is a high tolerance for sexual harassment and violence in bars. Because the milieu is highly sexualized, women who report violence are not taken seriously.

“It has happened to me lots of times - well, a few times. Someone will grab your breasts or your crotch, or your ass. Those times I try to pass it off. I have heard of guys coming up and saying “Can I touch your tits?” And you say “No.” And they have done it. That happened to one of my

girlfriends. And she just ignored it. She said 'you big jerk', but didn't bring it to anyone's attention. It might be fear or maybe even shame - you are guilty by being there. What were you doing there, you went downtown and you deserved it. Like if someone touches my ass in a crowded bar. If I try to bring up assault charges I'd feel stupid going to the RNC or something. 'Well, I can identify the guy.' 'What did he do?' 'Well, he touched my ass in a crowded bar.'"

"We have reached this point of tolerance. I find the bouncers are pretty good if you bring it to their attention. A friend of mine had been living in Toronto for a couple of years and she had become accustomed to a very hands off kinda environment in bars. We went downtown and this guy in the bar grabbed her ass. She turned around and wanted to know who it was. She was freaking out. At one point I looked at her and said, 'Cathy, relax, don't worry about it, he just grabbed your ass.' And then a week later I sat down and thought, how could I do that? How could I have said it's OK, don't worry about it, it's OK, because really it is not. We accept it as being OK, if a guy grabs my ass I turn around and the guy smiles and points to his buddy and says 'It was him.' I just walk away...and something that now we consider so small at one point in time would have been a big deal."

"There is also the whole thing of assuming you are going to be laughed at. I got home and told my boyfriend what had happened, that a guy grabbed me between the legs. He also happened to know the guy. He was like, 'What did you do?' And I told him I pushed him away. And he was like 'Well, you have to call the police.' And I started laughing. Like 'Oh, I was at a bar and this guy grabbed me between the legs.' And they are going to say 'Yah...AND...' That is just not the type of thing they are going to take very seriously. They really aren't. But if you are walking down the hallway at school and someone grabs you, it is more likely to be taken seriously. It is not like I was in a line at Kentucky Fried Chicken and someone grabbed my crotch. There is way more tolerance for this shit in bars. There is a lot that does not get reported because it is a bar."

Natalie describes how embarrassment can sometimes keep women from reporting assault.

"And sometimes guys will harass you more than just verbally. Sometimes, not all the time, you get guys who will be groping you and stuff like that. I knew this guy once, I was at the Breezeway, and I was dancing with him, he was really, really drunk and he got an erection while I was dancing with him. This bothered me for a long time after. He got a hard on while we were dancing and he took me by the waist and he pinned me to him and he was grinding it up against my leg and I couldn't get away from him. Every time I hear that song now I just get the heebie geebies."

What did you do?

Nothing. This was about 4 years ago - when I first started going out, I was about 19. No, I didn't even tell anyone until years later...too embarrassing.."

Lack of Knowledge of What Constitutes Consent

Too often young women do not understand what and what does not constitute consent.

“I have heard of cases worse than that - like sex, intercourse is taking place. And the woman has said no, and it’s happening anyway. She says, well, I guess I wasn’t clear enough, I didn’t get through to him. I was loaded. I went home with him, and I brought condoms. There is the big thing - like the NO Means NO, which is a great campaign. In the situation where you are actually there. Drawing on an example from friends. The girl goes home with a guy, she is incredibly loaded, he is incredibly loaded, she has sex with him. She wakes up in the morning and he is inside her going at it again. Is that considered date rape? A lot of people don’t get those times when it is not OK.”

I. WOMEN’S IDEAS FOR CHANGE

The women were asked to comment on how the second phase of “Bars, Booze and Sexual Violence” might address the problem of sexual violence downtown.

Frances and others suggested education for young men and women is needed.

“High School has a bubble. We don’t want to tell them everything. They don’t teach you everything that they should in high school. And they are not going to tell you about rohypnol. Oh, they don’t smoke, drink or have sex.”

“It is such a broad scope, it is not just about downtown, it is everywhere. Everything is about sex at our age, everywhere you go. I just think something has to be changed. I don’t know how, I would like to think that something could be done - it might have to be bigger than the bar.”

Ramona suggested society’s attitude toward violence against women has to change.

“A lot of people think if you are drinking it is your own fault, or if you dress a certain way it is your own fault. That is asking for it. You should be able to feel attractive without putting yourself in danger. There are people who wouldn’t feel so bad for a woman if she was raped while she was drunk and had a short skirt on than she was walking home from work and got attacked in an alley. Lots of people out there think like that. Attitudes like that have to be changed.”

“I like the idea of talking to the guys. Nine times out of ten it is them who got in all the trouble. It is different.”

Gina says exposing the problem of the acceptance of sexual violence in bars is required.

“There has got to be a way to get other people to start talking about it. If we do not have our own stance on what is right and what is wrong, how do we expect to get our message out. It gets really confusing because too many girls and women are out there and things are happening to them every night downtown and especially on the weekend. And they don’t think that they can say anything. And even personally, like I didn’t say anything. There are a lot of barriers out there.”

You can go to bars and talk to the people there, but you wouldn't be allowed into the bars."

Peggy sums it all up.

"It would be nice to think we could do something to change it."

J. CONCLUSION

Every six minutes there is a sexual assault committed in Canada and 90% of the victims are female. More than half of the women under the age of 16 in Canada have experienced some form of unwanted sexual attention. Sexual violence in bars will not stop by encouraging young women to develop 'survival strategies' alone. Violence against women will remain a pervasive problem until the patriarchal ordering of our society and its underlying attitudes of gender inequality change. Men commit acts of sexual violence because there has yet to be a strong enough message against it.

The thirty young women who participated in these focus groups know a lot about sexual violence in St. John's bars; many of them experience it. In preparation for this report the project coordinator attended a "wet t-shirt" night. This is not about "showing young people a good time". These contests and the general sexualized and violent environment of some bars create serious safety issues for young women.

Some bars have extensive training for staff and policies in place to deal with issues of bar safety. These standards vary among establishments. According to one lawyer in St. John's practicing in the area of civil sexual assault litigation, a bar or lounge owner may be found civilly liable for damages such as sexual assault caused to bar patrons. This may be the case when those owners create a dangerous environment, for profit, that is dependent upon lowering or removing patrons' inhibitions, such as one in which the price of alcohol is deeply discounted, or supervision and monitoring of patrons' activities is low or nonexistent. Simply put, bar owners may have a legal duty to ensure that female patrons are not subjected to sexual violence precipitated by the environment certain bars create.

K. RECOMMENDATIONS

Members of the Regional Coordinating Coalition Against Violence are deeply disturbed by the contents of this report and are determined to take action to improve the safety of bars for young women.

- That a meeting be held to discuss this issue with representatives from the following: the

Liquor Corporation, bar owners, the RCMP, the RNC, taxi drivers, municipal councillors, and community violence prevention organizations.

- That the City of St. John's institute standardized policies and procedures for bars dealing with the safety of bar patrons, including protocol and training for bar staff in recognizing and responding to violence against women.
- That a minimum pricing by-law take effect immediately.
- That bars discontinue marketing practices designed to exploit women and to create a highly sexualized environment.
- That police officers on downtown duty be trained in the dynamics of violence against women.
- That community and school gender-based violence prevention initiatives for young men and women emphasize the role of alcohol and date rape drugs in violence against women.