

Flying Below the Radar

Women¹ wrote about all the ways they tried to avoid being noticed at school and at home. Some hoped someone would see that something was wrong, others believed it was safer to stay invisible.

Anna²:

While I was in class I tried my hardest not to be noticed so that the teacher wouldn't pick me to answer any questions.

Joanne:

I went to school pretending that nothing happened, full of anxiety and embarrassed that someone might notice. My teachers in grade 4 and 5 never seemed to notice because I started to excel in school because I wanted to feel normal and didn't want anyone to know what happened in my house.

I tried to stay invisible.... If I was good my stepfather wasn't, as mean .I also didn't want any more trouble for my mom. If my stepfather thought my sister and I misbehaved I heard about it during the next drunken beating my mother got.

Standing in front of the class was never an option for me. I told my teacher to give me an "F" because there was no way I would do it.

I believe I was on automatic pilot during those years to be sane today and the efforts I went through to keep everything a secret. I now wonder, did anyone notice and how could it go unnoticed.

Fumi:

I learned very young that I could get away with just not showing up if I wanted to attempt to make a problem disappear.

To my knowledge no teacher, principal, school nurse, counsellor or any other adult in a school setting ever acknowledged that there was something wrong. Not only did I feel invisible but the violence that I was experiencing was also invisible. To me, this ignorance was just another form of violence.

Amina:

I was always afraid that someone would find out what was going on at home and at the same time was yearning to yell out for help but my voice or words could not come out. I was afraid of what to say and what would happen if my mom found out.

Marlene:

I had to get up and go to school and act like I was okay. That was the hardest part for me I just wanted to scream out loud and tell everyone what I was going through, but I didn't want to get anyone in trouble, and that is why I kept my mouth shut.

Nancy:

Now as an adult, attending an anti-violence program, I still feel like I have some issues: I hate writing on the board in front of the whole class; I get nervous when I'm writing and someone is watching me because I end up making even more mistakes; I would rather do anything other than write when working in a group; I don't like to read out loud even in front of family.

Sonya:

Anything that made me stand out or that I wasn't sure I was good at, I stayed away from.

The anxiety, the outright fear of not knowing the answer to a question in class and my goal to be physically as invisible as possible all came directly from abuse and violence. In my mind I had lost all family and the assumption that there could be safety for me or that anyone could look at me and not want to hit me.

I most often had these panic attacks while in lectures. The feeling that I couldn't get up and leave without people noticing kept me glued to my seat and staring into oblivion. I finally stopped attending classes altogether.

If a teacher had been able to approach me and say that they've made specific observations and know that these can be signs that violence is happening in

someone's life, I would've found it much harder to walk away without saying anything.

Asha:

...after being sexually abused by my babysitter around six or seven years of age. I became less trusting with anyone; at school I became more withdrawn, I began to fear a lot of things. I became afraid to try to new things and become involved in things. I became more apprehensive and nervous to participate in the classroom. While I believe that this behaviour is greatly linked to my experience of sexual violence, I also believe that this behaviour was encouraged and even directed by the sexist attitudes and values of both male and female teachers in the classroom.

...all of the feelings and behaviours that I described above were increasingly compounded in the way that I would participate in the classroom because the perpetrators of these direct threats were in classroom, learning with me. I was afraid to engage, to participate, to draw attention to me- afraid to give anyone any "reason" to harass me after (and even during) class.

Up until I entered this program, I rarely spoke in class, and if I was chosen to speak I would get so anxious that I wasn't smart enough or that what I had to say wasn't relevant enough, or that if I was wrong, I would be laughed at and humiliated in front of everyone. So, I would just not say anything in class, even throughout my undergraduate degree

Kari:

I was always very quiet and would keep to myself quite often. I realize that I was taught not to express what I was feeling and not to talk about the violence in my home, therefore I grew to not even be sure of my emotions, which is something I still struggle with to this day. This has affected my confidence in how I feel that I communicate my ideas, which further ends up silencing me, particularly in the classroom

¹ In 2007 some students in the Assaulted Women and Children's Counsellor/Advocate Program at George Brown College took part in a research study where they reflected on the ways they could now recognize that violence had had an impact on their own learning. This research was carried out as part of the Weaving a Web project to develop www.learningandviolence.net The rest of the themes identified can be found in other sections of The Impact of Violence on Learning.

² All names are fictional.