

Be It Resolved:

Resolutions from the Canadian Mental Health Association Conference, "Women in a Violent Society"

In May of this year, more than a thousand women and about 20 men gathered in Banff, Alberta, to share what they know about violence in our society. Conference participants included social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, lawyers, nurses, front line rape crisis centre and shelter workers, psychotherapists, consumers, educators, students, native healers and activists from across Canada. After four intense days of workshops, the participants put forward recommendations for changing a mental health system which has to date failed to meet the needs of Canadian women and children. What follows is a summary of those recommendations.

Be it resolved that the emphasis of work on violence against women must be placed on prevention. To focus on repairing the damage rather than stopping it before it happens, is to accept brutality as normal.

Be it resolved that Government at all levels establish a continuum of services and programs to address the issue of violence against women. This continuum must include preventive, crisis intervention, response and recovery services, as well as services which ensure the accountability of offenders. Governments must be made responsible for ensuring stable and sustained funding. The establishment of such programs and services should be informed by feminist principles, should make room for consumer and provider participation, and focus on community-based projects.

Be it resolved that the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) initiate a class action suit against the patriarchal mental health system, at federal and provincial levels, for systematic abuse of women and children within the current medical model. The CMHA must start speaking out against the systematic abuse of women and children and work to develop alternative feminist models of care. The current medical model of the mental health system should be reversed with the endorsement of community-based, consumer-centred and consumer-run support services. CMHA boards, committees and staff should be educated about mental health by consumers.

Be it resolved that violence against women be named accurately. The CMHA must adopt a policy of naming, in its literature, exactly who is attacking whom, and of describing violence as the raping and beating of women. The research and examination of victims must not be promoted to the exclusion of the examination and revelation of how men victimize women. A policy of learning specifically from women of colour, native women, lesbians and working class women must become part of a consistent policy of inclusion.

Be it resolved that all organizing committees of CMHA conferences include aboriginal people, racial minorities, immigrants, refugees and lesbian and disabled women so that issues are integrated in a socio-economic/cultural context that reflects

Canadian society. Conferences should be made accessible to all women and should encourage participation from all women.

Be it resolved that the CMHA recognize the contributions of lesbians to the mental health field by ensuring lesbian representation on all committees, by actively soliciting workshop contributions from lesbian organizations, and by including references to lesbian perspectives in all workshops.

Be it resolved that the CMHA publicly endorse the research and theoretical work done by the Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres, transition houses, healing lodges, feminist residential centres and non-profit counselling centres. Mental health professionals must stop referring to the work of such groups without lending them real support, and begin acknowledging the crucial preventive role they play by giving women a place to run to in order to avoid being beaten and by publicly censuring the men who commit violence and the communities that tolerate and endorse such violence.

Be it resolved that the federal government be urged to fund a National Task Force to collect data for publication on overt and systematic gender bias in the legal system. The development of a specialized model to deal with violence against women and children, sexual assault and child sexual assault should be funded by Attorneys General.

Be it resolved that we work towards the economic self-sufficiency of all women in society as part of the struggle against violence. Provinces and territories must take responsibility in ensuring the speedy payment of all child and spousal support obligations. Women's labour in the home and in the work force must be remunerated in an equitable manner reflecting the economic benefits of their labour to society.

Be it resolved that all levels of Government provide immediate funding to train both practising teachers and Bachelor of Education students in dealing with violence. Students from the preschool to the university level should take part in compulsory life skills development programs dealing with such issues as self-esteem, assertiveness and gender relations.

Be it resolved that the training of mental health workers include exposure to feminist theory and practice which recognizes sexual orientation, poverty, minority groups, denial and the effects of violence against women. Agencies and institutions must begin legitimizing the mental health needs of workers by breaking the silence in the workplace and by implementing strategies for clinicians who are also survivors of violence.

Be it resolved, finally, that the next Women and Mental Health conference be centred on the theme of minority women and include speakers and workshops on lesbians, women of colour, aboriginal women, disabled women and francophone women.

This article was prepared by Jennifer Henderson, from the complete text of the Resolutions gathered at the Conference.