

Attack Violence at Its Roots

By Rosemary Brown

This text is a summary of Rosemary Brown's closing address to the 1991 Canadian Mental Health Association Conference, "Women in a Violent Society." It is reprinted from the *Summary Report* of that Conference.

"Violence in any society persists because there is a role for it, because it serves a purpose. And violence persists, to some extent, because people opposed to it have been addressing its manifestations, rather than its root cause. We should begin with a clear analysis as to the root cause of the various forms of violence in our society — and this conference has been a wonderful place to begin that process. Then we should follow on with a realistic analysis of where we can intervene, and how."

Brown, a former NDP MLA from British Columbia, now serves as Executive Director of the MATCH International Centre in Ottawa. She remarked that international development workers are continually asked two questions: Whether there actually is more violence in society today, and why women's organizations seem less concerned about violence directed at men.

On the first point, she said it doesn't much matter whether the increased perception of violence is a matter of actual incidents or increased media coverage. The important point is that "societies are appearing to be more tolerant of violence and, as such, they are societies in which women are at risk as we pursue our daily lives." If improved communication has drawn attention to this situation, "I am grateful for such improvement, because I accept that the first step in the struggle to end violence against women is in 'knowing:' in knowing that the violence exists, in knowing where it exists, and in what forms."

On the second point, she said women are very concerned about the violence men do to each other. However, "over the years, women have noticed a peculiar and life-threatening phenomenon: namely, that decision-making forces and social institutions have not accorded equal importance to the violence done to women." Rather than waiting for men to act as "our protectors and guardians," women have had to decide "to stop waiting for men to take our condition seriously and to address the matters of our safety, our life, our death, and our well-being ourselves."

Brown said MATCH International was established in 1975, after Third World women challenged their counterparts in developed countries to support their struggles for equality and justice. The organization now devotes two-thirds of its budget and staff resources to a program aimed at ending violence against women.

She noted that "exploring the scars which violence leaves on the emotional and mental health of women, although more difficult to observe and measure, is sometimes more important than treating the physical harms, because they go deeper and are more difficult to erase."

On this basis, she urged participants "to know and to remain aware of the lives, experiences and conditions of women outside Canada — not simply to satisfy our curiosity, nor even our nurturing and compassionate feelings, but because our lives as Canadian women and theirs are inextricably linked in overt and covert ways. Our experiences are echoed throughout the lives of each other, regardless of our country of residence."

Working in the international arena "continually reaffirms the idea that the world is a village, and that the basic attitudes and assumptions about women, and women's rights and lives, vary very little from nation to nation, from place to place. It also teaches, frighteningly enough, that forms of violence vary very little from place to place. It teaches that forms of torture against women are focussed on their sexuality, no matter what military regime designs them; that forms of exploitation are focussed on their labour, no matter which society develops them; that women's isolation is rooted in the patriarchal approach to our maternal and family demands, no matter what cultural or religious creed we adhere to. Women do more than live in a violent society. Violence against us is used to sustain and maintain the societies in which we live. Regardless of race, class, cultural or religious membership, we are part of the violent structures and processes which nourish and ensure their continuance."

In response to this reality, she said women must accept that they live in a violent society, and protect themselves to the extent that they can. In the words of the poster commemorating the Montreal massacre, the task is to "first mourn, then work for change." For mental health professionals, researchers and activists, this will mean going beyond the symptoms of violence and "looking at the strategic needs of the victims whom we serve and work with and work for," Brown said. "In defining a violent society, we should go beyond looking at the physical and psychological cruelty and hostility that people visit upon each other, to include the social, economic and political ways in which harm is done to individuals and groups of people by social institutions and the state."

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