

# Changing Attitudes Toward Wife Assault Through Public Education

*Ontario Women's Directorate*

"I didn't think that men who would batter would wear \$500 suits, read poetry, and belong to expensive clubs," says a female on the radio.

"If there's been an assault," says the sober voice of an Ontario constable, "we lay the charge, we arrest the person, and we process the person for court. Wife assault is not a private family matter...it is a crime against society."

Correcting misconceptions about the nature of family violence, like the ones revealed in the powerful, personal testimonials above, is the motivation for a five-year public awareness campaign conducted by the Ontario Women's Directorate (OWD), a women's advocacy agency working within the provincial government.

The OWD began its campaign with four weeks of radio advertising in the fall of 1984. Former victims spoke candidly about their experiences and urged women to "break the silence" so that they could receive help, and so that all of us could better confront a problem that affects an estimated one out of 10 women in Canada.

The campaign was designed in two phases; the overall goal of its first phase, "break the silence," was to provide basic information about the nature and pervasiveness of wife assault, and to give women the information they needed about where to be for help.

The intent of the second phase, "Wife Assault: It is a Crime," was to encourage public support for preventative programs in the areas of crime enforcement, family support services and education, by helping the public to understand that family violence affects society as a whole. The message of the second phase was and is strong and clear: Wife assault is a crime *not* a private matter and it merits the censure of society as a whole. *Everyone* suffers from family violence. Victims are entitled to the protection of the law, batterers must be held accountable for their actions.

In addition to the radio campaign which continued in the spring of 1985, 16,000 posters in English and French were distributed province-wide, the poster also appearing in 130 community newspapers in 39 different languages. The directorate organized regional meetings in seven locations in order to inform key community leaders and involve them in strategy discussions. Four weeks of television advertising appeared the following autumn, with T.V. and radio ads available to communities for use as public service announcements.

The directorate also produced two brochures — *Let's break*

*the silence* and *Wife Assault: It is a Crime* — in English and French. These brochures supply general information:

- a list of shelters
- crisis telephone services
- programs for batterers
- an examination of the criminal nature of wife assault
- the role of the justice system
- the custodial and property rights of a battered spouse
- the protection to which an immigrant woman is entitled (it is the same as for all Canadian women)

Now in the final stage of the second phase, the OWD plans to produce the pamphlet *It is a Crime* in five languages — Spanish, Greek, Portuguese, Italian, and Chinese, and to work with community leaders of these target groups to develop educational sessions and community workshops. New television ads, planned to be released during Family Violence Prevention Month in May, are on the drawing board, as is a new poster aimed at the batterer.

What has been the effect of these efforts? A series of five Gallup polls conducted between October, 1984 (prior to the campaign), and July, 1987 (after the campaign), reveal a significant shift in the public's understanding of what type of behaviour constitutes wife battering. A much larger percentage of respondents (54% vs. 26%) now view swearing and arguing as abusive, and include psychological abuse (77% vs. 64%) and rape (90% vs. 82%) in the definition.

Results of the campaign's second phase show a significant change in public perception about what forms effective prevention. Many more respondents favour legal solutions and public education. The general awareness of local shelters has increased, province-wide, by almost 15 per cent since 1984 (65% vs. 53%) but at the same time, almost half the population finds it difficult to sympathize with a woman who remains in an abusive relationship (57% pre-campaign vs. 49% post-campaign).

"There's no doubt that public education is a crucial part of the prevention strategy, it can be slow going to change attitudes but public education is an important starting point," says Virginia Adamson, acting provincial coordinator of the directorate's family violence initiatives programs. "We'll continue our campaign — the stakes are too high for us to quit — until the public understands that wife battering is a serious and costly social problem."

The following is an excerpt from the OWD's *Wife Assault: It is a Crime* brochure:

### **HELP FOR ASSAULTED WOMEN**

A woman who has been assaulted by her husband or partner should know:

- help is available. In an emergency she should call the police. For other crisis assistance, she can call a women's shelter, a counselling agency or distress line, or her own doctor;
- she has the right to expert legal advice. If she can't afford a lawyer she can still get legal help by applying for legal aid. Legal aid offices can be found in the white pages of the phone book under Legal Aid;
- leaving her home because of violence will not be seen as desertion. She does not lose any of her rights to custody of the children or to her home and property, and she may be given priority for subsidized housing.

An assaulted immigrant woman should know:

- she has the right to the same help and services as all women.
- a landed immigrant will not be deported if she leaves her husband because of his violence, even if he sponsored her. A woman without permanent status should get legal advice about her options.
- her husband or partner will not be subject to deportation for domestic violence, unless his acts are extremely violence and result in criminal conviction with a severe penalty.

### **HELP FOR THE MAN WHO BATTERS**

The man who batters his wife or partner should not wait until he is arrested to get help. In most cases, battering is behaviour a man learns, usually while still a child. He can change that behaviour. He should take responsibility for his actions and seek counselling. The best way to start is through his family doctor or through a social service agency.

### **HOW CAN I HELP?**

You may know a woman in an abusive situation. She may be a relative, a fellow-worker, a friend or a neighbour. Talk to her. Tell her that it is dangerous to do nothing about violence. For her own safety and the safety of her children she should seek advice. Remind her that doctors, police officers, shelter workers, and other professionals are there to help.

If you see or hear a situation in the home of a friend or neighbour where a woman is being assaulted, don't ignore it. She is the victim of a crime. You can call the police.

If you know an abusive man, tell him that he is responsible for his own actions. Only he can change his behaviour. Without this change he risks losing his family, his good name, perhaps even his freedom. Counselling can help.

Children from violent homes need to know they are not to blame for the violence. Parents may not understand how much the violence is damaging their children. Encourage violent parents first of all to change their behaviour, and also to get help for their children if they need it.

Remember, closed doors haven't kept this problem from spreading. As long as we treat it as a family affair, wife assault will continue. By seeing it for what it is — a crime — we take responsibility as a community for stopping the violence.

Wife assault: *It is a crime!!*

**For emergency assistance or referral, see your local telephone directory under Wife Assault Helpline.**

**For general assistance on the issue of wife assault, contact:**

**Wife Assault  
Ontario Women's Directorate  
Queen's Park  
Toronto, Ontario  
M7A 1C2**

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**DIRECTOR**

**39 LAWRENCE AVENUE EAST  
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***Emma Nardella***  
***M.Ed., B.A., T.C., S.S.C.***

**73 Rosethorn Avenue  
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(416) 654-1905**