



ALL OUR LIVES: SEXUAL ASSAULT & OTHER NORMAL ACTIVITIES*

Barbara Roberts

La majorité des femmes canadiennes feront, ou ont déjà fait, l'expérience de la violence contre les femmes. Vingt p. 100 d'entre nous sont violentées sexuellement — une toutes les six minutes. Les victimes sont de toutes les races, classes, métiers et âges. Seule une minorité d'auteurs de viols vont en prison. Le système judiciaire n'applique pas les lois contre l'agression sexuelle, ce qui revient à donner tacitement aux hommes la permission de violenter les femmes. Les auteurs de viols ne sont pas des maniaques; ce sont des hommes ordinaires, "normaux". Dans des recherches sur les étudiants hommes (y compris une étude faite au Canada) deux-tiers affirmaient qu'ils utiliseraient la force (le viol) s'ils pensaient pouvoir s'en tirer sans conséquences. Les auteurs de viol ont comme caractéristique des attitudes dures: ils croient aux mythes répandus au sujet des femmes (nous aimons toutes cela); ils croient à la supériorité et à l'autorité de l'homme; ils refusent de se sentir responsables de leurs actions. L'éducation des garçons est la raison première de la violence masculine. Le viol est un crime de pouvoir, non de sexe.

Violence against women performs a number of functions in our society: recreation for men; enforcement of male privilege and male access to our services and resources; enforcement of the systems of inequality and exploitation upon which our whole society and economy are based. Violence against women takes many forms, from the physical (child sexual abuse, rape, battery), to the ideological (misogyny, pornography), to the institutional (the wage gap, female economic subordination, enforced female performance of unpaid family work). Violence against women helps keep us in our place. It helps keep men in their place, too. Men are given spurious power over women (domination) instead of real power (empowerment) to choose whole and meaningful lives as competent, caring people.

Most Canadian women have (or will have) some first-hand experience of violence against women. According to recent estimates, 25 per cent of girls are sexually abused before we are eighteen years old, most often by a father or other adult male caretaker or au-

thority figure. At least 10 per cent of cohabiting adult women are battered. The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women estimates that 20 per cent of us are sexually assaulted: one every six minutes. Some U.S. figures are comparable. In 1980 Allan Griswold Johnson used actuarial techniques to estimate lifetime chances of rape for 100,000 U.S. girls aged twelve as 30 per cent; he says this is too low, because it is based on a high-reporting rate.

Estimates like these come from a number of sources. For example, in the U.S., surveys of women university students in the 1950s and 1970s revealed that 25 per cent to 50 per cent had recently experienced some form of sexual aggression or assault. A door-to-door survey of 551 women in Winnipeg found 27 per cent had been sexually assaulted/raped. A random survey of 250,000 in 10,000 U.S. households found similar rates. Other sources include the files of rape-crisis centres and other women-to-women services, reports from police, courts, and health-care workers, and surveys by academ-

ics, agencies, and others. Police say that sexual assault is underreported: the Toronto police say about 10 per cent of rapes are reported. If this is correct, then in 1979 at least 115,550 Canadian women were sexually assaulted. (But this figure doesn't include incest, child rape, or marital rape.) Although we cannot be sure the figures are perfectly accurate, the incidence of the various forms of violence against women is so staggering that a few percentage points hardly matter.

Who are the victims of sexual assault? Any of us! We range in age from a few months to over eighty years. We come from every race and class, every marital and family status, every occupation. Perhaps younger women are at greater risk; over half of the victims in the Ontario rape-crisis-centre files were under twenty, but that may reflect a greater likelihood to use the centres rather than a greater risk of attack.

Why these women? The simplest answer is that they happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, whether the place was their own home, their car in a parking lot, or the sidewalk. Bonnie Kreps interviewed convicted rapists for her film *This Film Is about Rape*. They told her, "it could have been anybody" who was there when the rapist decided to act. The Ontario files showed that 32 per cent of rapes followed some "legitimate" contact; he posed as an appliance repairperson, deliveryperson, friend of a friend carrying a message, or used another convincing excuse. In 10 per cent of rapes, she accepted a ride home from an acquaintance or family friend and he attacked her. In 33 per cent, he simply attacked without prior contact: broke into her home, grabbed her wherever he found her, and so on. Although statistics vary, the Advisory Council estimates that one-third of sexual assaults are by complete strangers and one-sixth as friends. Whether or not the victim knew her assailant previously, it is not her fault. The U.S. Federal

Commission on Crimes of Violence concluded that "only 4 per cent of reported rapes involved any precipitative behavior by the women," however broadly defined (hitchhiking, going on a date?). The causes and cures for sexual assault are not to be found in what women do or fail to do but in broad social patterns and pathologies over which individual women have little control.

Sexual assault often leaves long-standing scars. In one study, 89 per cent of victims said the rape had altered their lives in a major way. (The same is true of other forms of violence against women.) The Advisory Council estimates that 62 per cent of all victims are physically injured. Our bodies may heal relatively quickly. Other injuries may be longer lasting. We may feel anxiety and fear for years. There is good reason to feel this way; not only past but future violence puts us all at risk. Further, most of our mainstream institutions blame the victim, which compounds our injuries. It is difficult for us not to blame ourselves. It is also difficult to form relationships with men. Because rapists are not easily distinguishable from other men, we can't be sure who's safe and who isn't.

Rape is easy to get away with. Few rapists go to court; fewer go to jail. In Canada the ratio of suspects brought to trial for offences reported to the police (and only about 10 per cent of rapes are reported) is lower for rape than for any other crime against the person. If the case goes to court (and in 1971 less than half of reported rapes had charges laid), the chance of conviction is lower than for any other crime of whatever nature. Of cases gone to trial, Lorene Clark and Debra Lewis found a 32 per cent conviction rate for Toronto in 1970 (or less than 2 per cent of all rapes committed), while the conviction rate for all other criminal offences was 86 per cent. The average sentence for rape in Canada was two to three years, but conviction does not necessarily mean

jail. Of 103 convictions in B.C. in 1973, only 58 men received any jail sentence. Despite improvements in recent years, only a tiny minority of rapists ever go to jail. The failure of the criminal-justice system to enforce the laws against sexual assault and other forms of violence against women amounts to a tacit permission for men to assault women.

Given that men can get away with rape, who are the assailants? Any man — perfectly ordinary men. "Normal" men! The main sources of information about them include records and personnel of the criminal-justice system; health-care professionals; rape-crisis and other women-run centres; studies, surveys, and interviews of convicted or admitted rapists; and large numbers of men who are not identified as rapists, such as undergrad students in colleges and universities.

The information available about rapists is extremely disturbing. For example, a series of surveys of male university students on North American campuses (including a 1981 survey at the University of Manitoba) consistently found that two-thirds of the men surveyed said they would use force/rape (Would you force a woman to have sex against her will? Would you rape?) if they were sure they would get away with it. Other surveys of male students show that substantial percentages have actually used force, and even larger numbers see nothing wrong with doing so. Some of these surveys are discussed in Neil Malamuth's article "Rape Proclivity among Males" (*Journal of Social Issues*, Fall, 1981).

The normal man is similar to the rapist. The rapist may be pathologically vicious, but he is not "crazy" or unaware of what he is doing. Nor is he simply "horny." A flood of data refutes the myths that rape is the result of a lamentable excess of sexual passion or a confusion about the victim's signals (and casts serious doubt on the legitimacy of a "mistaken-belief" defence in the courts). About

half of rapists are married or cohabiting and have regular sexual outlets at the time they rape. About half of the rapists Kreps interviewed told her that they did not ejaculate during the rape. Rape is the use of a sexual weapon to carry out a violent assault on women. The intent of rape is not to gain sexual gratification, say many rapists, but to assault, injure, humiliate, or degrade the victim. Rape is a crime of power, not sex.

Most rapes are planned. The *B.C. Resource Manual of Rape Prevention* estimates that 58 per cent of single-assailant rapes are premeditated, as are 83 per cent of two-assailant and 90 per cent of three-or-more assailant rapes. Many rapes are gang rapes. In B.C. cases studied, 43 per cent of the victims were assaulted by two or more men. One Ontario study showed 30 per cent of the cases surveyed were gang rapes. Clark's and Lewis's Vancouver research led them to estimate that 50 per cent were gang rapes. Victims of a group rape are outnumbered, overpowered, and simply have no chance to resist. Most rapes involve violent physical force; many involve weapons. Most (58 per cent of Ontario cases and 52 per cent of Winnipeg cases) rapes in two studies involved beating, choking, and so on. A 1974 RCMP manual on rape cases commented that "most women viewed the rapist as a potential murderer." Most women have good reason to do so.

Various studies have identified characteristics of rapists. These include callous attitudes to women (it's okay to rape us; we're not quite human and like or can't feel pain); believing myths about women (we really like it; we don't respect a man who takes no for an answer; women are virgins or whores, and if we're raped we must be whores); believing in male superiority and authority (gotta keep us in our place; what uppity women need is a good rape; God gave man power over women); refusal to take responsibility for their actions and feelings or for the

harm they do to others. Similar characteristics are found for wife batterers and sexual abusers of children.

Training a boy into masculinity is a necessary foundation for teaching him to be violent. Most men are socialized to be insensitive to the feelings of others (or for that matter, to their own) and to separate thoughts from feelings, actions from consequences. Recent work by Carol Gilligan on moral development shows that women are taught to make moral decisions in terms of connectedness and responsibility to others, while men are taught to decide on the basis of principles and ideas, often at the expense of relationships and feelings. Just as to become soldiers men must learn to wall off their feelings and to see other people as objects and targets (cunts, gooks), ordinary men must learn the same lessons on a smaller scale simply to be accepted as masculine. Not all men ever go into the military, of course, but there are other forms of basic training for violence. Recent research on pornography shows that there is a direct link between exposure to violent porn (over half of porn is violent nowadays) and aggression against women. Such respected figures as Hans Eysenck have called pornography "hate literature" and "an incitement to violence against women." (Excellent sources include Laura Lederer's *Take Back the Night* and Jillian Ridington's recent studies for the National Association of Women and the Law and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women.) Pornography is a basic-training manual for rape and other forms of violence against women.

Sexual assault is only one form of direct violence against women. It really does not matter which form is discussed: because they are all linked, they lead to the same disturbing questions about the fundamental values and priorities of our society. Statistics on the incidence of violence against women are shocking enough when taken

by each type, but when added up they are beyond belief. If one victim equals one assailant, then the majority of men may be directly violent toward women. Using conservative estimates (one in four girls sexually abused; one in ten wives battered; one in five or one in three women sexually assaulted) produces a figure of 55 per cent to 68 per cent of men who are assaultive. Of course, there may actually be a minority of repeaters who carry out several forms of assault against women and girls. One piece of evidence for this theory (admittedly a pretty slim one) is the similarity of the characteristics of all these types of assailants. We have been asking why some men rape/batter. Perhaps we should be asking why some men do not.

What can we do? In the short term, more of the same — pick up the pieces, refuse to collaborate, investigate and document the hate and the bloodshed, and offer ways out. Where the laws are good, we can insist that they be enforced; where bad, changed. In the long run, we have not only to take back the night but to take back our lives and become whole, new women. In the long run, somebody has got to help men to change, to become caring and responsible people, to heal themselves, to empower themselves, and to become whole. In this sense, violence against women is a men's issue. For women, triumphing over our legacy of hate and violence is the biggest challenge we face today. Our survival (and the survival of all life on earth) depends on it.

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**This article is taken from several longer studies, including "No Safe Place: The War Against Women," Our Generation, Spring, 1983, and "The Death of Machothink: Feminist Research and the Transformation of Peace Studies," forthcoming in Women's Studies International Forum, 1984. Sources for statistics can be found there.*