

THE PERPETUATION OF WIFE ASSAULT

*A woman, a horse and a hickorey tree,
The more ye beat them, the better they be.*

Brenda Boswell

Aujourd'hui, les femmes battues trouvent que la société leur donne peu de soutien quand elles portent plainte pour attaque contre elles, et va même jusqu'à établir des barrières pour que justice rendue à leur égard devienne difficile à obtenir. L'attitude traditionnelle qui consiste à voir la famille comme une unité sacro-sainte, subsiste toujours, surtout dans les tribunaux, et le public ne perçoit pas que l'homme qui bat sa femme commet un crime. On accepte encore la violence comme un moyen de résoudre un conflit, et la maison est considérée comme territoire privé. La société continue à donner aux hommes l'impression que leur femme est leur propriété, et ferme les yeux quand les femmes qui sortent des rangs "reçoivent ce qu'elles méritent". La violence contre les femmes disparaîtra seulement quand disparaîtront les stéréotypes sexuels et les modèles de soumission et de domination dans les relations hommes-femmes.

Although some people may find this old saying amusing, the one in ten Canadian women who are as-

saulted by their mates will testify that it is no laughing matter. Every day, women from every socio-economic background are beaten by the men who love them. Not just slapped or pushed, but beaten severely enough to require medical attention in some cases. Many of these women become so caught up in the psychological aspects of wife assault that it is nearly impossible for them to regain control over their lives and seek an alternative. Those who do look for outside intervention often find that society is against the woman who is a victim of violence in her own home and that looking for constructive help is difficult.

A recent study in London, Ontario, of women who contacted the police showed that they were beaten an average of thirty-five times before they made the first call. Statistics from Vancouver show that for every 100,000 separate incidents of violence against women by men, only 8,000 are actually reported. Of those, only 2 ever make it through the complete judicial system and receive a conviction.

These statistics are really not surprising in a society where men are often given the impression that they have ownership of their wives: nearly every aspect of our society condones "natural male rights," and women who overstep the boundaries get what they deserve. When they try to have violence against them stopped, society sets up barriers to make it difficult for them to receive justice.

In recent legal history, as late as 1891, it was actually legal for a man to beat his wife. That law has been abolished, but no legal remedy has been put in its place to alleviate the concept of ownership. As with rape, the victim of spousal assault is made to feel perpetrator of the crime rather than a victim of a criminal act. These types of laws are slow to change, and in the interim, there is difficulty enforcing those that exist, so that there appears to be a silent conspiracy within the justice system to prevent women from obtaining legal justice. Courts hold the traditional belief that the family is a sacrosanct unit which is vital for a

healthy society. It is not worth jailing a man merely because he beats his wife.

The perpetuation of such attitudes is at the very crux of the problem of alleviating wife assault. As long as the public does not view wife assault as a crime, there will be a lack of judicial interference and no pressure to enforce existing legislation. The woman who is assaulted has the cards stacked against her. How can she expect society to support her in this dilemma when the judicial system is unwilling to address the issue, and the issue as a whole is legitimized by society?

In order to change attitudes toward victims of wife assault, the concept of ownership must be eliminated. Attitudes will not change until there is the belief that a crime has been committed.

In general, spousal assault is a private problem in the eyes of society rather than one to be dealt with at the public's expense. The first question asked is usually, "What did you do to deserve the beating?" Families and friends sometimes remove their support. Some women have actually been told that it is their lot in life, and being a good wife means accepting the bad with the good.

In our society, there is a climate which condones and reinforces aggression, and there is little women can do to escape it. Asymmetrical sex roles are perpetuated through every aspect of our daily lives through the media, employment, education systems, and religious teaching. The government tends to downplay the seriousness of the situation through its inability to fund major programs.

The lack of political support results in services that are, in general, not responsive to the observations of wife assault. This is evident in all areas of the "helping professions" where women often go undetected as victims of crimes. Counselling usually works on the premise that the family must be kept together at all costs, and only when the children begin to receive treatment similar to that of the mother is a move made to dissolve



Photo: Gord Erb

the family unit.

The low rate of conviction of batterers appears not to be so much with the lack of laws, but with enforcing those that exist. Each police force is open to interpret the laws concerning assault as it sees fit, and some do not consider it a serious matter when it involves a wife. Many individuals within the ranks consider that hitting a wife is normal, acceptable behaviour which every man does occasionally. The forces as a whole lack appropriate intensive training to handle domestic situations and have little knowledge about previous involvements with the call they answer, which often makes their response inadequate.

When a woman decides to take the matter into her own hands, she is often faced with obstacles which make it impossible for her to continue through the judicial system. Crown attorneys are just too busy to spend time advising the women, and obstacles are placed in their way to weed out those who would possibly back out. If a charge is requested to be dropped, Crown attorneys become disillusioned. The next woman faces the same difficult system.

It appears that even judges are tainted by their own attitudes and beliefs when it comes to giving judgment. Many see the judicial system as acting as a bandage for the dysfunctional family, patching up problems by forgiving and forgetting. They worry that if the hus-

band is charged, he will beat his wife worse the next time. One judge notes that the man's just being in the court system is a great deterrent itself, and that if more men reached that stage, there would be few assaulted women. He also notes that there is a double standard when it comes to sentencing.

The lack of appropriate response in the judicial system is reflected in the fact that all institutions, either overtly or implicitly, uphold the family in the most traditional sense. Violence is legitimized because it is an accepted form of resolving conflict. What goes on in the home is private. There are fewer sanctions about violence in the home than anywhere else.

Violence against women will end only with the removal of sex-role stereotyping and the dominant/submissive pattern with which men and women are currently burdened.

Although attitudes are very slow to change, there are things that we can be doing right now to ensure that these attitudes begin to change. The most important is to raise our children free of sex stereotyping. We can also lobby for increased protection of women from violence through the enforcement of existing laws and the creation of new laws. Political support of transition houses and advocacy systems for women are needed, as are programs for men who batter.

Young women should realize that wife assault is a serious problem that we are all subject to and be aware that the potential for battering exists in *all men*, although some are much more likely candidates than others.

If you suspect a man is a batterer, don't think he will stop after the wedding. Realize right now that you don't have to live with being beaten. Look for the following characteristics which men who batter often have in common: unusual jealousy and possessiveness; strong belief in male/female roles; inability to cope with frustrations; inability to communicate effectively; quick and violent temper; experience of violence in the family

as children; great dependence on their partners. Men who beat their wives come from all backgrounds. The only thing you can be sure of when deciding if someone is a batterer is that if he hits you when you date, he will hit you harder and more often after the wedding.

One slap can be considered an accident, but the next time it happens, it is a pattern and not to be taken lightly. Before you know it, you will be caught up in a vicious circle. If you do nothing else, at least talk to staff at a transition house for assaulted women. There you will find support and an alternative, if you want one.

The problem of wife assault will not go away, but it can be dealt with in a sensitive manner, a manner through which the attitudes of society will be shaped and women will be offered protection from violence in the future.

Sources

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Blood Flows

I tell you
Blood flows!

And you say
"Relax
You knew your period was due."

But, I tell you
Blood flows!
Washes, a warm tide
Sticky and sickly
Over our city.
We've always consumed it
It's been like mother's milk.

You tell me
I'm always crazy when the moon's full.

I tell you
Blood flows!
Though they lie about it.
Blood of children
From My Lai
From Auschwitz
From Wounded Knee,
Running beneath our streets
In the sewers of history.

You look up from reading
The Story of Civilization, Vol. I
To say, "Yes, I know all about it.
It's always been that way.
There's no *point* in getting upset. . ."

So, you know all about it
Sophisticated
Coward.
Does your head know
What I feel
In my womb, in my heart, in my tears
That the blood that flows
Is not a metaphor and
May someday
Be ours?

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