

# THE SILENT CRIME



## AND THE BEGINNING OF CHANGE

### Marsha Endahl

*Travailleuse sociale, l'auteure a aidé des centaines de femmes battues. Les femmes maltraitées sont issues de tous les milieux sociaux, de tous les niveaux d'éducation, de revenus et de styles de vie. Elles ont toutes des traits caractéristiques communs: elles sont passives dans leurs relations personnelles; elles sont isolées sur le plan social; elles sont dociles et donnent donc un accord tacite à la violence. Elles veulent toutes croire que leurs hommes vont tenir leurs promesses de ne jamais recommencer. Mais toutes, éventuellement, doivent arriver à comprendre la réalité de leur situation, à développer confiance en elles-mêmes, et savoir qu'il est de leur droit d'être partenaire à part entière.*

It was Sunday night in downtown Toronto. City streets were relatively quiet and lights were out in the majority of homes. I was falling asleep at 11:30 when my "voice beeper" shrieked "3601 urgent call Susan Brown, 22-1111." I

was on duty for the Emergency After-Hours Service of Family Service Association, a United Way counseling service. A quiet voice asked for her social worker. When I told her Mary was unavailable until Monday morning, she began to cry. Knowing Mary's full caseload of assaulted women, I asked if she had been hurt that evening. Slowly and cautiously the story unfolded.

Susan Brown, age twenty-nine, had worked all week as a high-school teacher, had cleaned her house, chauffeured three children to various lessons, and had entertained her in-laws for Sunday brunch, despite feeling as if she'd come down with the flu. Her husband had gone to look for his light jacket, which she admitted she forgot to pick up at the dry cleaners. Jack, age thirty-five, an insurance sales manager, had punched and kicked her and pulled her hair, saying she was a "dumb blonde floozy" who couldn't be trusted. When she begged him to stop, he laughed and slammed her against

the wall. Their six-year-old daughter had entered their bedroom, hysterically screaming for Daddy to stop hurting Mommy. Jack had told daughter Jenny, "You have to train women to obey or they'll never learn how to behave."

That incident had been four and one half hours prior to her phone call. The children were asleep, dishes and laundry were done, and Susan still couldn't open one swollen eye. This wasn't the first assault. Nine out of the past eleven years of marriage, ever since the children arrived when Susan was still a university student, she'd been assaulted periodically. She'd been too shocked, humiliated, and embarrassed to deal with it. Until two weeks ago, when she'd first seen Mary for a problem with her eight-year-old's fighting at school, she had hidden the facts about one of Canada's foremost "silent crimes."

Tired of wearing long-sleeved dresses to cover up bruises, she'd finally told Mary her story, but

only because Mary specifically asked if she had ever been assaulted. This revelation was only the beginning. Mary had informed Susan of her rights and her status of being a "victim of a crime" and had informed her of options of obtaining counselling for herself, for Jack, of separating temporarily or permanently, of housing, welfare, legal services, and about the possibility of charging Jack before a justice of the peace or the police.

Tonight Susan needed to confirm those options. After declaring that tomorrow's schedule of a performance appraisal by her supervisor and a parent-teacher interview at 4 p.m. at school couldn't be cancelled, Susan decided to stay at home with the children. She planned to keep her appointment with her social worker on Tuesday and felt assured; if her husband came home from the ball game and attempted to assault her again, she would phone me back at the emergency number.

Susan's story is not unusual. She's one of thousands of women in Toronto who are at the beginning stages of breaking out of the domestic-violence patterns of their relationships. It won't be an easy road to travel.

Since coming to Family Service Association three years ago after ten years' experience in counselling, group work, and community development, I have seen hundreds of "Susans" and now have a caseload where 45 per cent of the fifty families I'm in contact with have an element of domestic violence in their presenting problem.

Violence against women is a crime touching us all. Women who are bruised, battered, pushed, shoved, beaten, hit, or slapped come in "all sizes, shapes, and colours." They are *not* commodities but are treated by men as controllable objects. Abused women I have seen have had educations ranging from grade four to Ph.D.'s. They are lawyers, teachers, social workers, factory workers, housewives, cleaning women, clerks, and bank tellers. There are women with no incomes and some with large investment portfolios. They

are British, American, Portuguese, Italian, East and West Indian. Many are married to their assaulters and some merely "date" their men. Many have children and are ideal parents. Some abuse their children. The children are all affected by this crime despite the parent's denial of their knowledge of it. I have had women in my office dressed in fur coats and labelled dresses and women who had to ask for streetcar tickets to go home. They have come at a variety of stages but they do have common characteristics. According to author N. Star (in *Social Casework, The Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, June, 1981), victims of domestic violence tend to "internalize blame and responsibility for the violent encounter." My clients tell me they "burned the dinner, nagged him when he was tired, didn't clean up the house well enough." According to Star, "their willingness to carry the burden of guilt reduces the assaulters' need to accept responsibility for their actions." Victims are *passive* in their interpersonal relationships. Many of my abused clients have held responsible managerial positions, have been professionals or volunteers, and gave the appearance of being confident, competent people; but many *reacted* to their interpersonal worlds rather than taking an active role.

Star's third characteristic, that of being *socially isolated*, has always been an important place to begin therapy. Because the woman is embarrassed, loses confidence in herself, and has difficulty understanding why she continues to stay in a domestic-violence situation, she gradually isolates herself from friends, family, and colleagues. She feels that if she doesn't confront the reality of her bruises they won't be as painful to bear. She can more easily ignore, deny, and forget about them.

Last fall I ran a group with twelve women, ranging from twenty-one to fifty years old, ten of whom had been victims of domestic violence. All but one were working in steady jobs. The most common factor in the group was,

for fairly articulate, verbal, competent clients, that none of them had "a best friend" or close network of supportive friends. They admitted having isolated themselves after the violence began and it got to be a habit. These women spoke of lack of measures of normalcy in the relationship. Several had grown up in abusive homes; others had been in similar relationships with other men. Some had deep, bitter, and confused feelings about how they could both love and hate their assaulting partners. All the women struggled with the severe isolation they had experienced when they had attempted to leave the abusive relationship.

*Compliance* is Star's fourth characteristic. "If I don't argue, I won't get hurt" is a familiar cry. "Although compliance means survival to the victims of assaulters, it means agreement and tacit approval for continued acts of violence," Star claims. Often women describe the men who have assaulted them as "caring, intimate, charismatic, generous, and very exciting" when they're not being abusive. One thing we as social workers try to teach these women is that no matter how much they comply or cooperate, the assaults will not stop because this inappropriate attempt for control and expression of anger is a reflection of that man's insecurity, incorrect perception of his role as a "man" and hers as a "woman," and lack of owning responsibility for his behaviour.

Assaulting men appear to hold an undefinable power over these women. It's easy to see how difficult it is to leave a domestic-violence-filled marriage if we look at finances, housing, further isolation from friends and family, lack of skills for jobs, shortage of daycare, and the sense of admitting the failure of the relationship. My women's group spent a lot of time sharing the ambivalence of attempted separations and numerous reconciliations. Women have been socialized to believe in their responsibility for creating a "happy home." If they can't "fix" the poor interaction, they feel something is wrong with them. Sexist advertising was

portrayed in an excellent film, *Killing Us Softly*, by the National Film Board of Canada. In the women's group, amazement and concern were expressed at the subtle message of male dominance and acceptance of violence that we see daily.

When women consider leaving the relationship, they have to deal mainly with the threats and fear of retribution from their assaulting partners, but more so they fear a "scriptless future." "Dick and Jane" primers didn't tell us about single parenting, but they also didn't tell us that "Prince Charming" would twist "Cinderella's" arm behind her back while he pinched her, which a recent client told me her spouse had done at a fund-raising dinner. The reason, he stated, was that she'd had the audacity to voice her concern about his frequent business trips in front of his colleagues.

Carol, one of my lesbian clients, has a totally different background and array of experiences. Carol was an incest victim at twelve, a

rape victim at fourteen, and lived in a marriage riddled with domestic violence for eight years while raising two sons. Carol is now in a stable relationship with another woman. She's a university student with close gay male and lesbian and heterosexual female friends, but she hasn't forgotten her pain. She has a basic distrust of men who are bigger and stronger and finds it difficult to believe that she can respect men. Her spouse is now in prison on assault charges that she laid. I've never worked with a woman yet who didn't feel guilty charging her spouse.

These women all want to believe that some magic will make their men keep the promises to "never hit again." They must all embark on a long journey to understand why men are violent, how only men can learn to control it, and how and why they respond as they do. Victims of assault need to develop confidence, a deep sense of worthiness, and a knowledge that their right to be a fully functioning partner is a "given," not a privi-

lege. These women need to understand how deeply assault touches the lives of their children and what role models they're playing.

There is hope. Violent men can be treated individually or in groups such as the one written about by David Currie of Family Service Association (*Treatment Groups for Violent Men: A Practice Model*, February, 1982\*). Marriages and relationships can and do go on with violence completely stopped, but only when both partners recognize why it has occurred and find new ways to deal with the everyday stress of working and living. Joy, sadness, anger, hostility, jealousy, passion, and pleasure are all a part of our lives, but there is no place for violent expression of these feelings.

\*Copies can be purchased from Family Service Association, 22 Wellesley Street East, Toronto, Ontario M4Y 1G3.

Marsha Endahl, a counsellor for fourteen years, has worked at Family Service Association in Toronto for three years.

November 9, 10, 11, 1983  
Holiday Inn – Don Valley,  
Toronto

# Women+Therapy

## A three day conference

of 35 lectures and workshops  
• to explore the social issues which influence women's mental health  
• to improve counselling effectiveness  
• to deepen self-awareness  
• a major event for all who are involved with women's mental health

**Phyllis Chesler**, Keynote address by the author of *Women and Madness*  
**Helen Porter**, Storyteller, will present *Voices of Women*

Lecture and workshop topics include:

Problem-solving group • Psychodrama  
• Myth of women's masochism • Pornography • Tranquilizers • Spirituality  
• Abortion • Menopause • Alcohol • Teen mums • Incest • Politics of motherhood • Lesbian counselling • Anorexia • Gender fair counselling • Body image • Visualization • Family law • Funding for research • Ex-psychiatric in the community • Self-help • Sexuality • Family violence •

Hakomi body work • Empowerment • Career stress • Women working with immigrant women • Eating disorders • Housing

**For full information** call or write:  
**Professional Development Associates, 3 Cameron Crescent, Toronto, Ontario, M4G 1Z7. (416) 486-6925**

For full information: 3 Cameron Cres., Toronto, M4G 1Z7

name

address

postal code