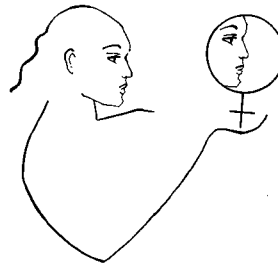


A Group for Incest Survivors

Barbara Waisberg

On parle de femmes victimes d'inceste qui se sont groupées
et qui ont survécu à cette indignité. On trouve aussi
des renseignements pour les femmes qui aimeraient
mettre sur pied des classes du même genre.



In 1978, in response to internal concerns and the growing evidence of violence against women in our society, Toronto's YWCA began an education project around the issue of violence against women. Although examples of violence are everywhere, there is a special violence suffered by women. The victims of rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, incest and pornography are overwhelmingly women.

The project has 3 premises:

1. Violence against women is distinct from other forms of violence in our society and is related to the definition of women, men, sexuality and property.
2. This violence is not an isolated phenomenon or an individual problem, but a social/political problem rooted in our history, our traditions and embedded in our laws and institutions.
3. The solution to this violence is therefore a social/political solution.

One part of our project has been the group for incest survivors. This is a small seven-session discussion group, led by a therapist, for women who were formerly victims of incest and are no longer in the situation. Incest is defined as the sexual abuse of a child by an adult who is related in some way to the child. Our definition is wider than the legal concern with penetration and with blood ties and excludes sexual contact between two related children of similar age, or two related adults. The purpose of the group is to allow women to explore the incest experience in a safe supportive confidential setting and to place that experience in a social and political context. It is made clear from the outset that the child in no way has any responsibility for the incest. The child has neither power or knowledge in this situation. It is the abuser who must assume responsibility for the betrayal and coercion. It is necessary to establish this principle in the group because it is not one that is clearly reflected

or even accepted in the community. Frequently, the child is blamed for the incest and the shame and stigma attaches to the victim rather than the aggressor.

Although we have advertised the group widely, the response has been very slow. We believe it is because women have been prevented for so long from talking about the experience that it is very difficult to come forward. We feel that continued information and discussion of the issue will facilitate this process. To date, there has been one group.

This group was successful by its own evaluation and ours. Members experienced individual learning and growth and found a great deal of support within the group. The discussion format felt less threatening than a therapy group. Discussions dealt with personal experiences, feelings about fathers and mothers, sexuality and current relationships. When we began planning for the group, there was only one therapy group for incest survivors in Toronto. Now, other groups are starting and, although survivors don't have adequate services, there is a growing recognition of the need among women's groups at least.

It is curious that with all the concern for, and research on, the family it has taken so long for this problem to surface. There is very little data on incest and there are no real options for the victim. What is clear is that this is not trivial or a rare occurrence. It is a problem that has been with us for a long time. Because its victims have never had power or voice, we have never had to confront the disturbing and brutal reality. It is now imperative that we deal with it. As with rape and wife assault, it is women's efforts that will effect the change.

Further information about the project and/or group can be obtained from: Barbara Waisberg, YWCA of Metropolitan Toronto, 15 Birch Avenue, Toronto, Ont. M4V 1E1 (416) 925-3137. ☺