

Falling Through the Cracks: Domestic Violence Against Women in Canada

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Introduction

Violence against women in domestic relationships is a significant social problem with debilitating consequences for its victims. In the past twenty-five years, there has been increased acknowledgment that this issue reaches beyond the private family sphere. As a result, policy initiatives at the federal and provincial levels have reflected this change in societal attitudes (Hick, 2006). Nevertheless, measures taken to protect the victims of this crime remain inadequate. Despite significant advances in gender equality over the past quarter century, the Canadian government remains structured in a patriarchal manner, with women's issues given low policy priority; in fact, it has been argued that women's issues are regressing in importance (Creese & Strong-Boag, 2005).

Women attempting to leave abusive relationships face insurmountable barriers in meeting even their basic needs. The problem lies not in the existing services available to these women, but rather in the lack of them. Although the work of social workers on the individual level remains vital for these women, combating this problem at a structural level will require the mobilization of social workers and communities on a much larger scale.

Part I

Creese and Strong-Boag (2005, p. 14) claim that "health and safety ultimately depend on access to resources and freedom from violence and other threats to physical and mental well-being." A recent statistic on violence against women and girls (Hick, 2006, p. 185) states: "Every year, over 90,000 Canadian women and children are admitted to shelters for battered women." If domestic violence, as defined by Humphrey (2006, p. 90), is "several forms of abusive behaviour—physical, sexual, emotional or

psychological” —then a large number of women in our country are unable to meet their basic needs for health and safety.

It is true that all family members can experience domestic violence. Newman and White (2006, p. 187) point out that females also act violently towards their spouses, and for this reason current Canadian policy labels this issue as ‘Family Violence’. There are many problems with this definition, however, the most important one being that gender-neutral language diminishes the fact that women “experience more severe forms of violence, such as choking, beating, sexual assault, [are] more likely to require medical attention or hospitalization, and [are] more likely to fear for their lives” (Statistics Canada, 2003, as cited in Newman & White, p. 187). Currently in Canada there are alarming statistics regarding the rates of violence against women and girls. For example, “Every week, at least one woman in Canada is murdered by her boyfriend or spouse” (Hick, p. 185). Given a social problem of this magnitude, one would expect to see immediate and urgent solutions proposed to combat this problem. Why is it that we do not?

Violence against women is derived from an historical patriarchal system of inequality. Patriarchy is defined by Sylvia Walby as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (as cited in Price, 2005, p. 25). The acceptance of violence against women stems from a system whereby women and children were considered the property of men; as a result, men had the authority to discipline them for alleged misbehaviour. Stetson (as cited in Newman & White, p. 188) reports that the term ‘rule of thumb’ comes from the common law courts’ rule that “a husband’s legitimate authority to use violence to control his wife, children and other

family members was limited to the use of a stick no larger than his thumb.”

We have been led to believe that the system of patriarchy is no longer relevant, but Hick (p. 175) states: “Men are still the major stakeholders in Canadian society. Men continue to be represented in higher numbers in positions of authority and male interests continue to take precedence over those of females.” One need not look further than the structure of our government to confirm the existence of patriarchy. This is of critical importance to the issue of violence against women, because lack of government support allows the perpetuation of violence to continue. Women comprise fifty-one percent of the population, yet they are not adequately represented in government. Newman and White (p. 97) state: “In June 2005, women held 21.1 percent of the seats in Canada’s House of Commons, and as of December 2003, women held 20.3 per cent of the seats in provincial and territorial legislatures.” The importance of having women in political office is that issues faced by women are “neglected largely because they are not part of the lived experience of members of the dominant groups in society” (Newman & White, p. 102).

The mass media is another way in which our culture encourages violence against women. In *Killing Us Softly 3* (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2000), Kilbourne speaks of the objectification of women, explaining that by turning women into commodities, violence is made possible. The video highlights many advertisements that are highly suggestive of violence. The average person views approximately 3,000 advertisements daily, further evidence that our culture does not take violence against women seriously.

It was during the early 1980s that the issue of domestic violence was first raised in the House of Commons. Newman and White (p. 4) report that Margaret Mitchell, who was an NDP member of Parliament at the time, faced ridicule from male members of the

