

Battered women: Victims of society

By Paula Siepniewicz

Karen was just 14 when she met Richard. He came with his family to one of her parents' summer barbecues. He was 19, a journeyman electrician, working in the construction business, and did both their fathers, Karen's father liked him immediately.

By the time she was 15, Karen and Rich were 'going steady'. Most of their social life was with Karen's brothers and sisters, and it was generally a happy time.

Occasionally, when there were other boys from Karen's school included, Rich would become moody and silent. He said they were immature, and he made her promise that she would not pay attention to them. He talked about getting married as soon as Karen was old enough. Plans become more specific; they were married soon after Karen's 17th birthday. It was soon after this, after a party at her sister's that they had arrived home and no sooner had the door closed than Rich suddenly and viciously punched her in the face.

She reeled back in horror and surprise. He accused her of flirting with her brother-in-law — suggested she had probably been carrying on an affair with him. She denied this and he hit her again. She locked herself in the bathroom until she heard him go to bed. She spent the night on the living room chesterfield. She told no one.

The beatings continued. Karen, ashamed, told her parents nothing. When the bruises couldn't be hidden by sunglasses or high-necked sweaters, both she and her husband would lie about them.

When finally he threatened to kill her or her baby, she tried to tell her parents. They wouldn't believe her. Such things didn't happen. She should just go on being as good a wife and mother as she could, and everything would be alright.

One day she heard a staff member from a transition house for women who have been battered being interviewed on the radio. Four days later Rich beat her up again. The next day, after he had gone to work, she packed up the children and went to the house. She had been married five years. She had bruises on her face, neck, and abdomen.

Finally her parents were forced to face the fact that something terrible had been happening.

Karen stayed at the transition house for three weeks while she went through the court process. During that time she met with a counsellor from the community college and discussed, with growing excitement, the possibilities for further education.

Before she had left the transition house she had enrolled for the coming term in an upgrading program to complete her high school. Day care would be provided by the college, and her parents would support her until she was self-sufficient.

Two weeks after she returned home, Rich broke in, locked her two children in the bedroom, beat Karen, and finally shot her. He then went into the basement and hanged himself.

Extracted from *Wife Battering in Canada: The Vicious Circle* by Linda MacLeod, for the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women)

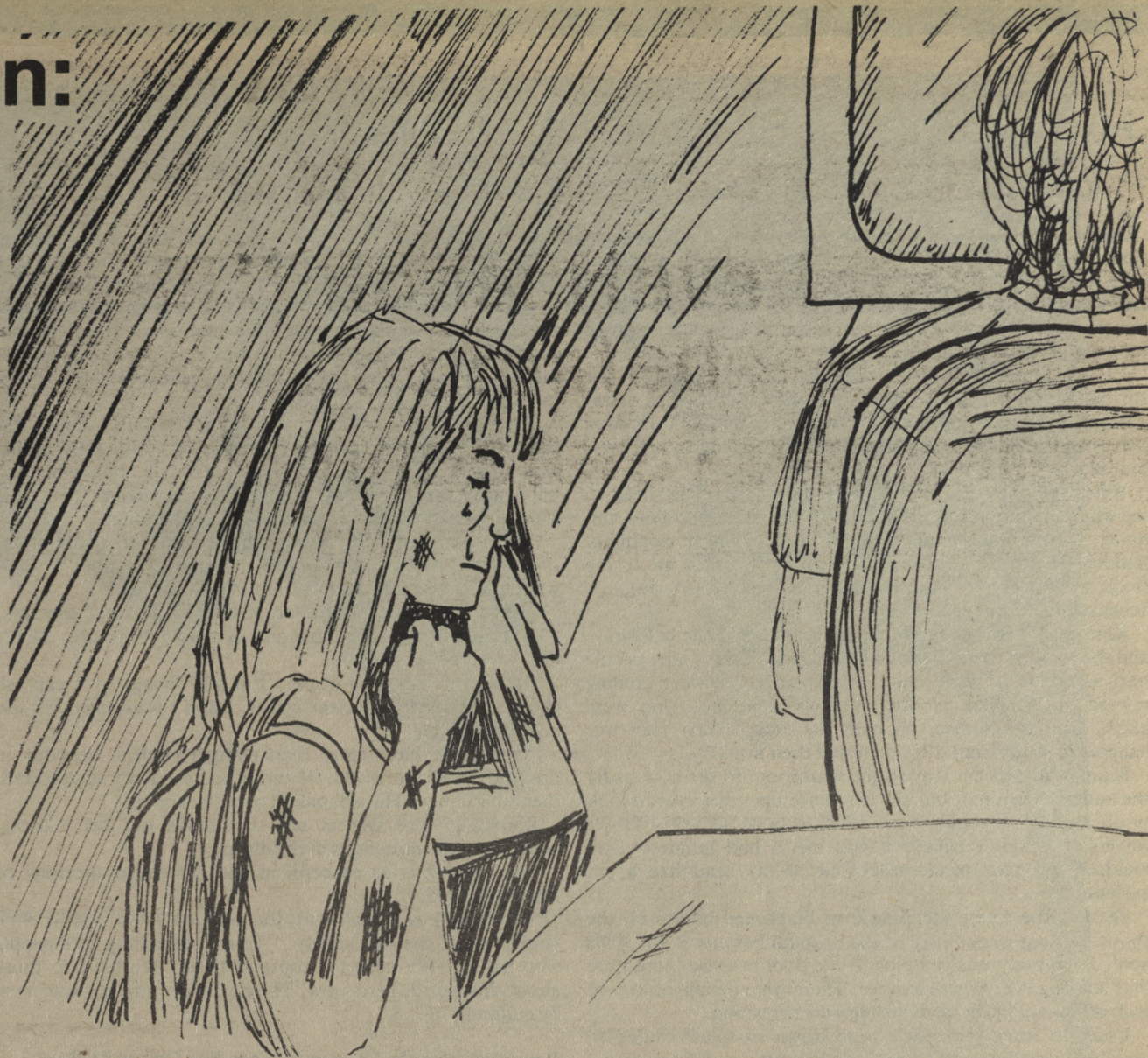
What wife battering isn't

Family violence is not an uncommon or 'freak' occurrence. Recently there has been much publicity about child abuse, and the police, the courts, and concerned citizens have been quick to rally to the cause. However, there has not been nearly as much attention paid to wife battering.

Unfortunately, wife battering occurs in every neighborhood across Canada: in upper class homes in Vancouver, within working class families in Cape Breton, in the McGill student ghetto in Montreal. It crosses all economic, geographic, and cultural lines.

Wife battering is not merely the result of a family 'tiff' that got a bit out of hand. More than 75 per cent of the women surveyed in a British study on battered wives stated that the physical abuse was rarely preceded by verbal disagreements. Nor is wife battering a one-time occurrence. According to one of the staff members at a Montreal shelter for battered women, more than three-quarters of the women they receive have been beaten at least ten times.

On top of physical violence, battered women are subjected to the psychological violence of the taunts and threats by their husbands, and of trying to reach out for help outside the family help that is often not there for them.



Battered wives are more than just a bit 'roughed up'. In a survey of battered women in shelters across Canada, MacLeod found that more than one third of the cases required and received medical treatment. Battered women are slapped, punched, kicked, bound, burned, knifed, and shot.

Why men do it

It is hard not to wonder why men beat the women they supposedly love. If wife beating is not an uncommon occurrence, there must be some common factor in cases of marital violence that explains the phenomenon.

According to MacLeod, men's and women's socialization have set the scene for marital violence. She notes four historical themes that have led to wife beating:

1. men were considered to own their wives
2. women were expected to obey their husbands and conform to the ideal of self-denial (and self-sacrifice)
3. men had complete authority over their wives that was unquestionable within their own home
4. women's place was in the home

Wendy Ayotte, a member of the collective operating, Assistance aux femmes, a Montreal transit shelter for battered women and their children, elaborated on this theory.

"It comes down to the patriarchal power in the family. Women have only been persons before the law in the past sixty odd years. A lot of men see violence as a means of disciplining their wives which, in their minds, is perfectly justified. And it is condoned by society — by relatives, the courts and the police, who all turn a blind eye to the situation," says Ayotte.

Personal experience seems to confirm this explanation. When asked why she thought her husband beat her, a woman recently out of a Montreal transit shelter for battered women replied, "Society — my husband was taught every horrid thing he did to me from the day he was born".

Men have been raised to assume power and control. They have also been socialized to be aggressive — aggression that has often mistakenly been labelled as 'natural' or 'instinctive'.

According to J.J. Gayford, author of *Battered Wives*, "Pregnancy is the factor that most often precipitates violence in marriage." This supports the theory that men use violence to assert control, and beat their wives when they feel a lack of power.

Pregnancy and women's sexuality are areas where men feel they have little or no control, and to many men, this poses a threat to their power over their wives.

Why women put up with it

Battered women do not get a masochistic thrill out of being beaten. Unfortunately, however, it is not very easy for battered women to pack up and leave after one punch. Their

situation, sociological, financial, emotional, and legal, make escape very difficult, if not impossible.

According to Linda MacLeod, the most important factor that keeps the battered wife with her husband is her isolation.

Says MacLeod: "Our society has been organized around the belief that the home is a private and peaceful domain, and that a woman's role in the home is to preserve privacy and peace. When a woman asks for help because she is being beaten, she challenges this belief and so challenges the very roots of many of our institutions, among them our legal and medical institutions ... The result is that the woman is frequently punished by and isolated from the outside world if she ventures into it for help."

A second reason why battered women remain in a violent relationship is the wife's financial dependence on her husband. A woman cannot receive welfare payments as a single mother until she has her own address, and she can not have her own address until she has the financial means to live away from her husband.

Even in middle or upper class homes, where there is no shortage of cash, the wife has no access to the family funds, and is completely dependent on her husband to pay for her and her children's basic needs.

Thirdly, in spite of the violence that exists in the family, there is often still a lot of love, and that is hard to surrender. Says Ayotte, "A lot of women remain silent hoping that their husbands will change. They don't. Few men seem to even question their behavior."

A final tremendous barrier for battered wives seeking escape is the legal system. Under Canadian law, a man can not rape his wife, and a woman can not sue her husband.

Comments Ayotte, "The legal situation points out that assault within marriage is not criminal, making the battering of women almost acceptable. There is no support for the crown prosecutors and police, which is not surprising, considering the fact that there is a very high incidence of violence in police families. Men are practically encouraged to beat their wives."

Upon examining the facts, it is hard not to feel that the situation is hopeless.

We are far from adequate law reform, sufficient funding for transit shelters for battered women, government funded cooperative housing for single mothers, adequate counselling for violent husbands, and, above all, a society where no man has a blinding desire for power.

When we have all that, we'll have just about everything.

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