

Agencies work together to fight wife abuse

by Greg Halinda

When a woman is battered by her husband, she is probably reluctant to phone the police and charge him with assault.

She loves him and depends on him; she will wait and hope he doesn't hit her again. Besides, she thinks, this is a private family matter, and none of the police's business, right?

Wrong. Assault, whether within or outside of the family, is a crime. When a man hits his wife in anger and harms her, he is, in the eyes of the law, a criminal.

An assaultive husband is such because hitting is his means of trying to control his wife. He has likely been brought up by parents who would hit or slap him to control his behaviour.

The husband feels he has a need to control his family, especially if he thinks of himself as the sole provider. If he perceives his wife as being unhappy with his efforts, or as trying to take some of his control away, the husband will use violence to reassert himself, or to cover up his emotions of sadness and pain.

Until 1983, it was up to the wife to charge an abusive husband with assault. By standing up for herself (and pointing the finger at her husband) she was risking humiliation and reprisal. These are some of several psychological barriers that keep women from reporting assault.

Because of these barriers, wife abuse is very much kept underground. Last year, 7000 women and children sought refuge in Alberta's 13 women's shelters after being abused physically or psychologically by their husbands. An additional 2000 were turned away because of already-full shelters.

Edmonton's first Women In Need House (a shelter for battered women) was opened in 1978. A second was added in 1982. "The second was built because we were turning away so many women," said Ruth Pinkney, director of WIN House.

It is likely even more women are being battered and not reporting it, according to an estimate that one in 10 women living with a man is abused at some time by her partner.

This social problem concerns all of society. However, even the experts — the sociologists, the police, the social workers, women's groups, the courts — don't know how to solve it. They all share this common quandary: "Something has to be done, but I'm not sure what it is."

What the agencies involved do know is that they must start working together, sharing knowledge in a multi-agency approach. "We've been trying to work in isolation from each other for a number of years, and it hasn't worked," said Sgt. Wayne Gesy, Family Violence Coordinator with the RCMP.

Women's shelters provide a vital service to battered wives, but are only a "Bandaid" solution.

Police forces are becoming aware that wife abuse and other forms of family violence like

child and elder abuse are community problems. The police now take a closer look at incidences of family violence and if they find evidence of an assault, they will charge the offender.

This means the onus of laying the charges has been taken off the victim.

Murray Straus, an American sociologist, thinks a policy of arresting assaultive husbands is an effective deterrent to continued assaults.

Straus points to a 1984 Minneapolis experiment which tried to measure the effect of arresting men who assaulted their wives. The result of this classic study showed a much lower rate of repeated assaults among the men who were arrested.

This only means fewer repeated assaults were actually reported to police, however. It does not indicate whether or not the problem has gone underground.

Sgt. Gesy thinks one of the most effective ways to lessen the burden of an abusive husband on the wife and family is to remove him from the residence.

Treatment, not incarceration, is the effective follow-up to the arrest. The man cannot rectify his need to control people while sitting in jail. In Edmonton there is a program available to help batterers stop their hitting.

Forensic Assessment Community Services counsels four groups of men who have either run against the law for assault, or have realized their problem and volunteered to take group therapy.

FACS also has a support group for the partners of these men, the battered women.

"What we're trying to do is to help him stop hitting, and get her to insure her safety and the safety of her children," said Mike Crawford of FACS.

Crawford describes the men's therapy as anger-management techniques. The men are taught relaxation, thought-stopping techniques, and how to remove themselves from the stimulus of their anger.

A big step in the therapy is getting the man to admit he has done wrong. The purpose is not to make him feel better about his behaviour, but to have him change it.

"People don't get to be in our groups unless they accept responsibility for their behaviour," said Crawford.

"Men eventually realize that when they feel hurt or sadness, they express it as anger," he said. "They are saying to their wives, 'You hurt me,' not 'I am hurt.'"

Crawford says the men in his groups range from 20 year-olds in their first relationship to 50 year-olds in their fifth. The average age of the men in the group is 30 years.

It would seem the ultimate roots of wife-battering lie in society's acceptance of the "moral rightness of hitting." The more frequently men are punished as a child, the greater the chance they'll abuse their wives.

Dr. Straus says primary prevention of wife



abuse will involve two things: (i) don't hit kids, and (ii) empower women.

"We found 97 per cent of parents in (an American study) had hit a three year-old," said Straus. "We need to start by reducing that, and ultimately eliminating that . . . it builds into the personality of a child a link between love and violence."

To "empower" women, Straus advocates equal pay for equal work, and breaking with the

"he wears the pants in the family" attitude.

"Studies show much more violence in families where the husband is presumed head of the household," said Straus.

Jean Reynolds, president of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, agreed, and thinks the problem can be eliminated at a young age. "In schools," she said, "we must make girls feel proud about themselves."

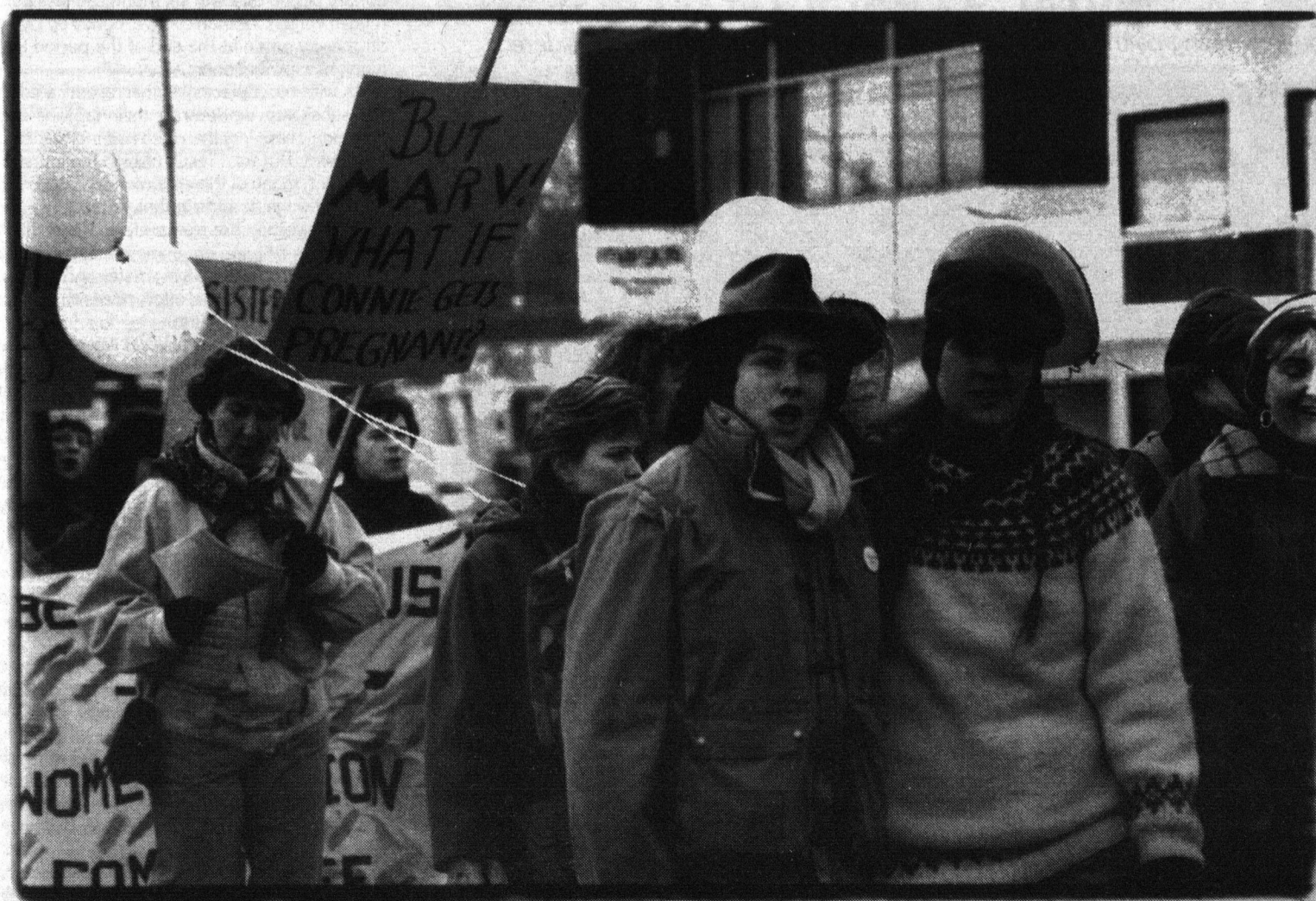


photo Sheryl Ackerman

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