

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S INEQUALITY AND VIOLENCE

The pervasiveness of violence against women has led many commentators on the subject to conclude that the phenomenon can be understood only by examining the social context of women's lives. The Committee was told that violence against women both reflects and reinforces women's inequality of status in relation to men. That is, the vulnerability of women to violence is integrally linked to the social, economic, and political inequalities women experience as part of their daily lives. Moreover, violence and fear of violence deprive women of their ability to achieve equality.

Many witnesses highlighted in their testimony the distressing, and all too familiar, unequal distribution of wealth, power and privilege between men and women in Canadian society. The Committee heard from Sheila McIntyre, of the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, that the feminization of poverty is growing, particularly among single parent mothers and elderly women. The wage gap between male and female earners remains unchanged, with a woman earning 66 cents of every dollar earned by a man in full-time employment. Women are likely to work in occupations which are characterized by low-paid, non-union, casual or part-time jobs with inadequate benefits or pensions, or none. Women are under-represented in managerial and leadership positions in both the public and the private sectors (4:27).

If a woman is living in a violent relationship, is responsible for children, and is economically dependent on her partner, her options are limited by her access to resources. Economic resources purchase safety and services. Money is needed to move, to hire a lawyer, to pay rent, to feed and clothe herself and her children, to access to child care, to pay for transportation, to return to school or enter a job-training program, and so forth. We know from research in one jurisdiction in the United States that after a couple's separation, men's standard of living on average rose by 42%, while that of women and their children declined by 73%. These factors make women economically insecure and dependent on men for financial support and, by extension, susceptible to violence.

A further explanation of male violence against women is the presence of traditional values associated with sex roles. Witnesses expressed concern about the manner in which masculinity and femininity are constructed in our society. Men are encouraged to