

'Intervention is the accepted norm'

## Professor advocates homebirthing alternative



Photo: Nigel Turner

York Anthropology professor, Shelley Romalis.

Carol Brunt

Although health awareness and consciousness have grown in the past 13 years, it has not prevented our society from being "victimized" by its understanding of childbirth, believes York Professor Shelley Romalis.

In an informal lecture at the Women's Centre, she outlined the power relationships inherent in childbirth, discussed women's present sense of false security, and presented an alternative to hospital birth in the form of homebirthing Romalis spoke on Tuesday.

The Associate Professor of Anthropology said childbirth illustrates power relationships--between professional and lay interests and between

women and academics. She relayed her own feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness when having her first child in 1969. Women have been conditioned to "listen to the doctors because they know best", but Romalis feels that there is a "need for real change in decision-making" surrounding the birth. "Women as consumers of health care have a responsibility" to try to achieve this," she said. "If the choice is to have a homebirth, it should be considered. The message from doctors and society is we (women) don't know what we want and we shouldn't be listened to."

According to Romalis, despite their reputation of safety, hospitals create most

of the detrimental factors involved in childbirth. Through intervention, including labour-inducing drugs and fetal monitors, labour has become "extremely problematic". In our culture, intervention has become the accepted norm, an idea generated by the doctors. Romalis said doctors see it as the quickest way to get through a situation that society assumes to be dangerous.

Homebirthing has become the alternative for some women. Romalis said that although it is widely practised in Holland, and accepted in many other countries, it is still regarded as something negative in Toronto. Women lobbying on its behalf have been unable to have childbirth clinics developed.

The alternative has gained acceptance in the United States due to the fact that hospital birth is very expensive. Concerning its lack of growth as an alternative in Toronto, Romalis commented that there is no "need to go outside the system. There is no place outside a hospital (referring to childbirth clinics) where it is legitimate to

have a baby in Canada." This is partly because the government doesn't want to fund them. The clinics would compete with hospitals, which already receive government funding.

Although there have been many changes within the last seven years regarding childbirth--having fathers present--its ideology is "hard to

### Enthusiastic discussions

## Forums conclude Women and Art Week

Barb Taylor

Forums featuring women portrayed by women in dance, poetry and iconography con-

cluded the Women and Art Week sponsored by the Women's Centre and CYSF.

Development and revitalization of women's art, which has been denigrated over the centuries was one of the main themes. Tsipora Lipton, a York student studying historic dance, said, "It's important for all people, especially women, to see themselves in a deified form--there's more of this for men in our society because all religions are based on men. The only female figures are victims-guilty like Eve or a victim like Mary."

Thursday, Lipton and Amelia Bird performed two dances which were based on ancient iconography and goddess imagery. The performance was followed by a slide show given by Professor Johanna Stuckey, Advisor to the President on the Status of Women. Stuckey pointed out that early images of goddesses were identified with nature, life, and love. Female deities were sometimes identified with snakes, which were seen as symbols of perfection, eternity and life. Stuckey demonstrated how the development of a patriarchal society drastically altered the depiction of women--forcing them into categories of whores and madonnas.

Ironically, compared to the dance and slide show, the Women's Art display in the bear pit last week was not dominated by feminist art. Some York students contributed art which was socially conscious, but several artists from offcampus concentrated on more commercial images such as women in ruffled blouses and make-up. However, Ellen Ambrulat, organizer of the art show, felt it was important "because women aren't getting exposure as artists." Ambrulat also felt that the enthusiasm that was demonstrated during the show, as well as the large number of women who participated, were the most encouraging aspects.

During the poetry reading, which concluded the Women's Art Week, the poets were able to effectively articulate the experiences in various women's lives: motherhood, sexism, and society's expectations of women.

Reaction to divorce and motherhood, emotions often overlooked in our society, were the basis of Marilyn Marshall's poems. This excerpt is from a poem, "Hurt in the Afternoon", which is a discussion between mother and daughter:

"Mother," she said. "You are one hell of a lady. You do not have a job or a lover. Why?"

These are her criteria for success.

This excerpt, from "To My Family", talks about the fallout from divorce:

We may continue to play our game  
Talk of albums and clothes that  
disguise the mess

I am making on your clean horizon.

Kari N. Brown, a student from a Toronto high school, read poems about violence against women, and about women and the peace movement. Brown sees her work as a social statement: "a whole other dimension of reaching people." York student Martha Carlson spoke about her family experiences, her views of her mother, and a woman's view of the world. Judith Santos, Women's Commissioner for CYSF, started her reading with a moving piece of prose about a woman friend who was 16 when she disappeared in Chile. Santos outline her friend's story, which Santos pieced together from other women who were in prison with her friend.

## Panelists probe the horror of torture and oppression

Greg Gaudet

Torture and oppression. Throughout the world thousands of lives are terrorized by the actions represented by these words. For this reason, last Wednesday evening at the St. Lawrence Centre, a panel of 11 speakers discussed the question, "How can we stop torture and oppression?"

Pierre Berton chaired the discussion, which took place before a full house. Speakers ranging from journalists to physicians, offered their views on how individuals and groups could prevent the horror of torture and oppression.

### Amnesty International

All speakers seemed to agree that individuals have the power to considerably alter the conditions of the tortured and the oppressed. In part this is due to the fact that oppressive governments are sensitive to international public opinion. Richard Roach, a member of Amnesty International, pointed out the importance and power of letters written to prisoners by individuals. According to people who have been imprisoned, "Letters addressed to political prisoners increase their standing (in the prison and with prison guards) even if they don't receive them." Roach described, in vivid detail, the extreme horrors that exist in some prisons, and the "disintegrated bones and withered skin" of dead and dying prisoners. Amnesty International is an organization dedicated to the elimination of situations like this and in a large part, their effectiveness is due to letter-writing efforts of its individual members and the resulting international public exposure.

Other speakers pointed out that the media play a large role in uncovering governments which unfairly treat prisoners of conscience. Tom Harpur,

religion editor at the *Toronto Star*, and Pierre Berton both agreed it was the responsibility of the media to continue its coverage of the issue.

There was a consensus among all panelists that the media had, in fact, devoted a considerable amount of favourable space to organizations such as Amnesty International and their causes. (At least this was considered to be the case in Canada.)

It was argued that oppressive nations are very sensitive to international media. Roach gave an example of a prisoner who could tell by the frequency and severity of beatings as to the amount of international protest. With more protest, the beatings decreased.

The role of religion in stopping torture and oppression was also discussed. Both Tom Harpur and Clarke MacDonald, moderator of the United Church of Canada, felt that religion was playing a large part in pressuring governments to end the torturing of prisoners. However, Harpur said "without religious support in many countries torture could not exist". He cited examples of high-level religious leaders who are honorary generals in the armies of oppressive governments. He also criticized top religious leaders for failing to speak out against torture more frequently.

### Foreign aid

Governments and labour groups can also play a vital function in stopping torture and oppression. According to Bob Rae though, "The theory is in international law that no government should enquire into other countries." As a result, he feels that "governments are failing us as citizens of the world."

Flora MacDonald, a Con-

servative MP, strongly emphasized the role each person can play by simply sending telegrams and letters to various governments officials, both domestic and international. In response to a question as to why foreign aid was continued to those countries in which torture was practiced, she said that the cutting of foreign aid doesn't just hurt the oppressive government, it "also hurts the people to whom the aid is directed." Most panelists agreed that the Canadian governments should increase the role it plays in the United Nations as far as criticizing oppressive governments is concerned. In this respect, smaller nations such as Holland and Sweden take leading roles and it is the responsibility of Canadians to ensure that their government acts strongly enough. The speakers also agreed that the government in Canada should increase the resources of the diplomatic coup in order to assess what takes place through the eyes of Canadians; not through second-hand information from another source. Labour groups too can exert influence on governments, as Dennis McDermott, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, indicated. He outlined ways in which the CLC was working with other national labour organizations including those in the countries that practice torture and oppression. He also mentioned the role of some multi-national corporations which contribute to oppressive regimes.

The discussion did not center only around the international areas, it also focussed on some domestic problems. One member of the audience spoke very passionately about some of the mistreatments which occur in psychiatric institutions in Canada.



Photograph by Himbara