

# Refuge for battered wives

by Cheryl Downton

To some, the mental picture of one human being battering another may be difficult to visualize; but to others, it is a picture that is all too real. Statistics are all but impossible to obtain, as domestic violence, like rape and sexual assault, is not a well reported crime. Incidences of domestic battering in Halifax, however, are considerable if only the visible cases are numbered.

A study conducted in the Metro area showed that in a one month period fifty women approached various social agencies looking for relief from domestic violence.

Because it does not usually occur in a public place, but happens in the sheltered privacy of one's own home wife battering remains largely unreported. For this reason and others several misconceptions surround the entire phenomenon.

There are no laws that specifically govern domestic violence, and there are some supposedly progressive countries which more or less condone wife battering. Even in Canada, the unwillingness to become involved in home situations can be seen as a form of acceptance, if not approval. Police are slow to respond to calls which indicate domestic violence, and this lack of enthusiasm is understandable—more police personnel are killed while answering calls to households than in any other call to duty. Women however, are also killed in incidences of domestic violence.

strangulation, drowning or suffocation. The immediate results of physical abuse range from broken bones, internal bleeding, bruises, swelling of body parts, scarring and permanent disfigurement. The majority of women battered in this manner respond in one of two ways—stay hidden from the public until their injuries have faded enough so as not to cause speculation or embarrassment, or, if the injuries require medical attention, stories are fabricated and excuses offered as to the cause of the affliction.



Psychological battering can best be illustrated by use of an example: a potted plant thrown against a wall to break and fall in pieces at the victim's feet, the point of impact just inches away from her face. This threatening with violent actions has the effect of causing the woman to stand in fear of what may follow such a threat. This ruthless intimidation may cause her to become jumpy and easily frightened.

The third form of battering can be the hardest to recognize. Intimidation not through action, but by emotion degradation. Emotional battering is more of a cruel minded game, and creates feelings of worthlessness and deteriorates the image of self. "You're a stupid bitch. You couldn't raise a kid if your life depended on it." It is not uncommon for emotional battering to involve recriminations using children as a tool to intimidate.

Several misconceptions have been applied to women who have been the

subjects of battering. The belief that "They must like the way it is or they would get the hell out" can only be termed as naivete to the nth degree—it's just not that simple.

The majority of women who find themselves in these situations are dependent on their partners for their financial well being. It is not easy to quit a situation, however intolerable, if there is no alternative accommodation or financial assistance available. Women in cases of domestic abuse usually have no emotional support, as the nature of the situation tends to cut relationships with those who may be able to provide support, simply because a battered woman feels she can not confide something as personally embarrassing and potentially shameful as being a battered wife.

A woman who has been a victim of domestic battering usually has confused feelings about herself and her situation. She is fearful, nervous, ashamed and isolated. She is confused by her feelings of anger combined with love for someone who has deliberately caused her injury. She is hurt. Although the needs of anyone experiencing this frustration and confusion may differ from individual to individual, certain basic 'wants' must be met, especially if the woman hopes to escape the reach of her tormentor. These needs include shelter, a listening ear, economic independence, and a trust in future safety; the latter can not be guaranteed without judicial change.

There is a refuge in Halifax which does its best to meet these needs of a battered woman. After many years of political lobbying and research, a transition house for battered women is available to those in need. **Bryony House**, so named after an herbal medicine used as a remedy for bruises, has opened its doors to victims of domestic abuse seeking relief/refuge from their situation.

**Bryony House** has only been in operation since the second week in September, but women have already made use of their facilities. The house can accommodate twenty-four persons, including the children of the residents. There are seven staff members who operate on a rotating shift schedule and the house is in operation twenty-four hours a day.

There are a variety of services offered through the house, including on call medical and legal assistance, a child care programme for the pre-schoolers living in the house, workshops covering topics of interest to the residents, contact with the Atlantic Child Guidance Centre for input and referral assistance, and a working relationship with area schools which enables children to attend school without interruption.

Women are admitted according to need, available space, and municipal requirements. If the situation is not an immediate life threatening one, a woman goes through a pre-admission interview, where she is told of the procedures and programmes offered by the house, and is asked to set down a list of goals she would like to achieve during her stay, as well as long term aspirations. If a threat to life is involved, a woman can be taken into the house and the interview conducted at a later date.

**"They must like the way it is or they would get the hell out."**

One aspect of the **Bryony House** programme is a system of follow up and maintenance contact with women who have been sheltered at the house. There are no restrictions governing eligibility of repeaters, and the length of stay is determined by need and municipal guidelines. (Halifax city residents can stay a maximum of sixty days).

Partial funding is obtained from the municipality in which the woman has resided. The Social Services department pays a per diem rate for each resident in their jurisdiction. As regulations differ from municipality to municipality, so do rates and method of payment. The province provides some funding monies, and the house itself was 'purchased' through the Central Mortgage and Housing Commission and holds a forty year mortgage.

Wrinkles are still being discovered and subsequently ironed out—ideas for new programmes and continuing improvements are being implemented. Plans are underway for a programme involving volunteers to supplement staff capabilities. Women are being invited to participate in workshops even after they have left the house, in an effort to gain the input of experience.

In order that the women in the house may feel as secure as possible, the address remains unadvertised. Initial contact may be made by telephone [422-7650] and further arrangements will be worked out according to the needs of the individual(s).

Although a transition house is one step toward an answer—unfortunately, it is a vehicle primarily used after the fact. Public education may be a beginning, but at long as there is a willingness to sit back and be content in the belief that what happens between two adults in the seclusion of their own home is not our concern, women will continue to suffer unwarranted abuse.

**"You're a stupid bitch. You couldn't raise a kid if your life depended on it."**

Wife battering is not exclusive to one specific social class, ethnic group, religious orientation or geographical region. 'Weak' women are no more susceptible to domestic abuse than 'strong' women; well educated women are just as likely to be victims as those who have not completed grade school. And although alcohol misuse can play a role, it is not necessarily the prime force behind wife battering.

There are three types of domestic battering, with the most prominent being physical abuse. This can take the form of beating, burning, knifing,

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