

the
brunswickan

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OPINION...

Despite the obvious social import to women and the best intentions of the staff and volunteers of the Rape Crisis Centre, this year's *Take Back The Night* march seems again to be drawing praise and criticism. For those who are unfamiliar with the background of either, the Rape Crisis Centre is a volunteer agency that works to assist victims of sexual assault in attaining aid and/or advice (should women readers ever need this service: it is there for you--use it!). *Take Back The Night* marches are protest marches for women designed to give them, for one night, a chance to walk the streets alone without the protection of men.

Although *Take Back The Night* marches originated in the United States in the early seventies, the cause was not taken up by Canadian feminists until the eighties. The first march in Fredericton took place in 1985 and though it was sponsored by the Rape Crisis Center, it was also held in conjunction with a student women's conference being held at UNB. It was decided by organizers that first year that men were to be excluded entirely from the march which, of course, drew commentary from members of both sexes whether in favour or against. The next year it was decided to say nothing about male participation and guess what? no or few men attended. There was also correspondingly little in the way of public commentary one way or the other. Which brings us to tonight--the third annual *Take Back The Night* march.

The official word is that "women and children are welcome." I called the Rape Crisis Centre and spoke with both coordinators of the march to inquire if this meant that male supporters were unwelcome? and was told that although it was preferred that men not participate, they would not be prevented from doing so under the condition that they remain silent. According to both coordinators to whom I spoke, the purpose of the march was for women's voices to be heard. They also felt that women may not feel comfortable or really free in expressing themselves in the presence of mixed company. Further, it is a march by women to demonstrate their solidarity and the focus of observers and media should be on women and not drawn away by a male presence. And...well, let's face it: some men do have a way of taking things over. All good reasoning and done forthrightly and in the best of faith.

However, there is another side to all this that is equally correct and which bears examination especially for those women and men who see sexual assault less as a gender problem faced only by women than as a social issue which has implications and consequences for members of both sexes. Rape is not an act aimed at sexual gratification--it is an act of aggression which involves physical violence. Yes, rape is physical violence directed toward women but it is only one form directed at one group. While I applaud the Rape Crisis Centre and participants of *Take Back The Night* marches for their efforts in confronting at least one form of social violence, I think it is simplistic to ignore the fact that sexual assault is only part of a much larger issue, namely the issue of aggression in our society.

I also have a great deal of trouble accepting the Rape Crisis Centre's request that men remain silent. One coordinator told me that she felt it was a good exercise for men to remain silent for one night so they know what women endure the other 364 days and night of the year. I think it is just as wrong to reinforce the image of women as silent victims who speak up only on special occasions as it is to punish or restrict the behaviour of the wrong men. Men who wish to take part in such forms of social protest are usually those who are already sympathetic or at least conscious of the problems women face and I must question the value of insulting male supporters by restricting their right to be heard on a problem that affects us all. Further, a supportive male presence speaks volumes to onlookers, female and male (not to even mention children of both sexes!), and isn't the whole point to increase public awareness?

One last point, if any male oriented social action group in Fredericton decided to hold a protest march or rally that restricted female participation or demanded silence from female participants, you want to believe that women's voices would be heard!

Karen-Jean Braun