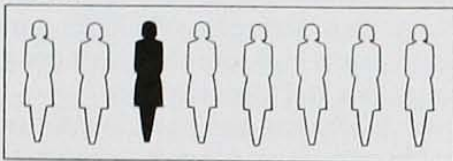


# BREAKING The Silence On Wife Abuse

By Janine Roelens-Grant

In 1970, when the Royal Commission on the Status of Women released its report to the public, violence against women remained a silent issue. It was not discussed in that report. Since that time, the women's movement has struggled to bring the issue to the attention of the public. And in the last few years, research indicates the following facts about abuse against Canadian women by men:

- 1 in 8 women is physically abused, more recent research indicates 1 in 4
- 1 in 100 women approach a transition house or apply for a divorce due to abuse
- 1 woman is raped every 17 minutes
- 84% of assaulted women are raped by someone they know
- 119 women were murdered during incidences of domestic violence in 1989



These are just some of the known facts. Researchers, however, state that the "true extent" of abuse against women is not known; they believe that over 2.5 million women are assaulted by men every year in Canada. Today, it is considered a "national epidemic," and representatives from the major women's groups are lobbying for a Royal Commission to look into violence against women.

## What Constitutes Wife Abuse?

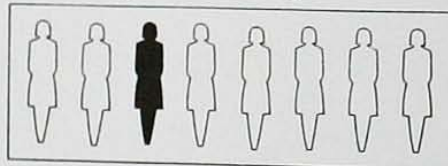
The term wife abuse, assault, or battering refers to the physical, psychological, economic, social and sexual abuse by a man against a woman. These terms are preferable to domestic or family violence because there is no doubt as to who is the victim and who is the assailant.

## What Types of Abuse Against Women Exists?

Abused women experience a wide range of physical violence - a slap in the face, punching, kicking, choking, biting, burning, stabbing, and sometimes physical abuse results in death. It is often the case that minor and infrequent physical assaults become more serious and more frequent.

Constant criticism, degradation and threats are examples of psychological abuse. Women who suffer this kind of abuse are made to feel stupid, inadequate and worthless. This kind of abuse undermines a woman's self-esteem, reducing her ability to make choices and take action. It is used by men to have power and control over the daily routines and decisions in a woman's life.

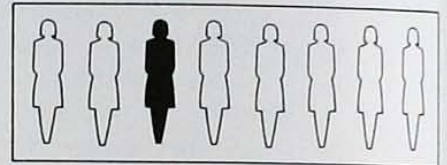
Depriving a woman of money, sometimes even for the family's basic living necessities, is another means by which a man can control his partner. On the other hand, some men "buy forgiveness" by showering their partner with material possessions; these women are further entrapped because they consider these things as "proof of their man's love." Women who work outside the home, however, can also experience economic threats. Their partners may intentionally incur high debts knowing that both are ultimately responsible, and knowing that this will have the desired effect of keeping a woman from abandoning a relationship.



Social battering occurs when a woman is deliberately isolated from her family and friends outside the home. Social isolation can be accomplished in a number of ways: simple denial of the time to spend with friends and family; denial of a means of transportation; choosing to live in an isolated area; or, constantly moving from place to place. Women may also choose to be socially

isolated to avoid the constant humiliation and insults from their partner in front of others.

Sexual assault and rape are often part of the pattern of abuse. Forcing a woman to have sex or participate in sexual acts against her wishes are the most blatant forms of this kind of assault. Many women believe that they have no control over their own bodies; it is their duty to fulfill their partners' sexual desires. And many men believe that their marriage to a woman gives them the sexual licence to do what they want, regardless of the woman's wishes.



## What Can Society Do In Response to Abuse Against Women?

In the past, society's response to battered women has been to minimize or deny the crime. Often, the courts, police, medical and health professionals, friends and family have further victimized women, directing them to avoid behaviour they feel has provoked the assault, and ultimately blaming them for the abuse. Any attempts at intervention to stop the abuse have been viewed as an attack on marriage and the family unit. Traditionally, it has been the intervention, and not the abuse, that has been viewed as more damaging.

Yet, wife assault is a crime! It is just as much a crime to assault a woman in her home as it is to assault a stranger on the street. We have begun to take responsibility as a society for stopping and preventing abuse. The fact that all cases of assault are now tried in Criminal Court and not Family Court is a step in the right direction. And the policy adopted by Canada in 1982 encouraging police to lay charges in cases of wife battering is another.

And in the last decade, there has been continued progress: the promotion of public education programs; an increase

*continued on page 14*