

Centre helps Asian sexual assault victims

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STAFF WRITER

A deep-seated, traditional aversion to discussing sex may be one reason York Region's Chinese-Canadian community has a disproportionately low number of sexual assault cases being reported.

And while police and social health workers admit they aren't exactly sure why the numbers are so low, they believe a public education campaign targeting the Chinese community can only help.

"Part of it is tradition and culture. People do not talk about sex, ever. They feel very uncomfortable with the topic and if something happens they feel ashamed," counsellor Florence Wong said. "Also, in the past there have been services only in English and we believe some people in that situation just don't know how to seek help."

The Sexual Assault Care and Resource Centre, which has been operating out of York County Hospital since 1992, has created an outreach program specifically aimed at the Chinese-Canadian community, Wong explained.

York Regional Police Const. Ben Eng is part of the newly formed committee creating outreach programs. He's the director of the force's Asian Response Unit, which provides language services and victim support.

And while the centre helped 54 victims last year and pro-

vided 564 counselling sessions, Wong and Eng agree very few Chinese women report sexual assault or sexual harassment to anyone.

"The situation cannot exist in terms of the numbers reported. We must encourage victims to come forward. And the only way to do that is let them know what's out there," Eng said.

In fact, statistics show 90 per cent of sexual assaults are not reported to police even though one in four women in Canada will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime. Some of those women have got to be Chinese-Canadian, Eng said.

Wong, who conducts seminars and workshops on sexual assault, sexual harassment, healthy relationships and self-esteem, said she has been asked by the Chinese-Canadian community to change the name of her programs to delete the word sex. "I've been told people won't come otherwise."

"From my perspective, in prosecuting offenders, we often see a somewhat traditionalized, deep-rooted chauvinism that still exists," Eng said.

That chauvinism can be two-fold, he explained. Men feel their relationship with their spouse or girlfriend is strictly their own business. And many women feel it would be inappropriate to report what's going on in their private lives.

Wong agrees, saying married women simply do not believe they can be sexually assaulted by their spouse; that a true assault is only perpetrated by a stranger.

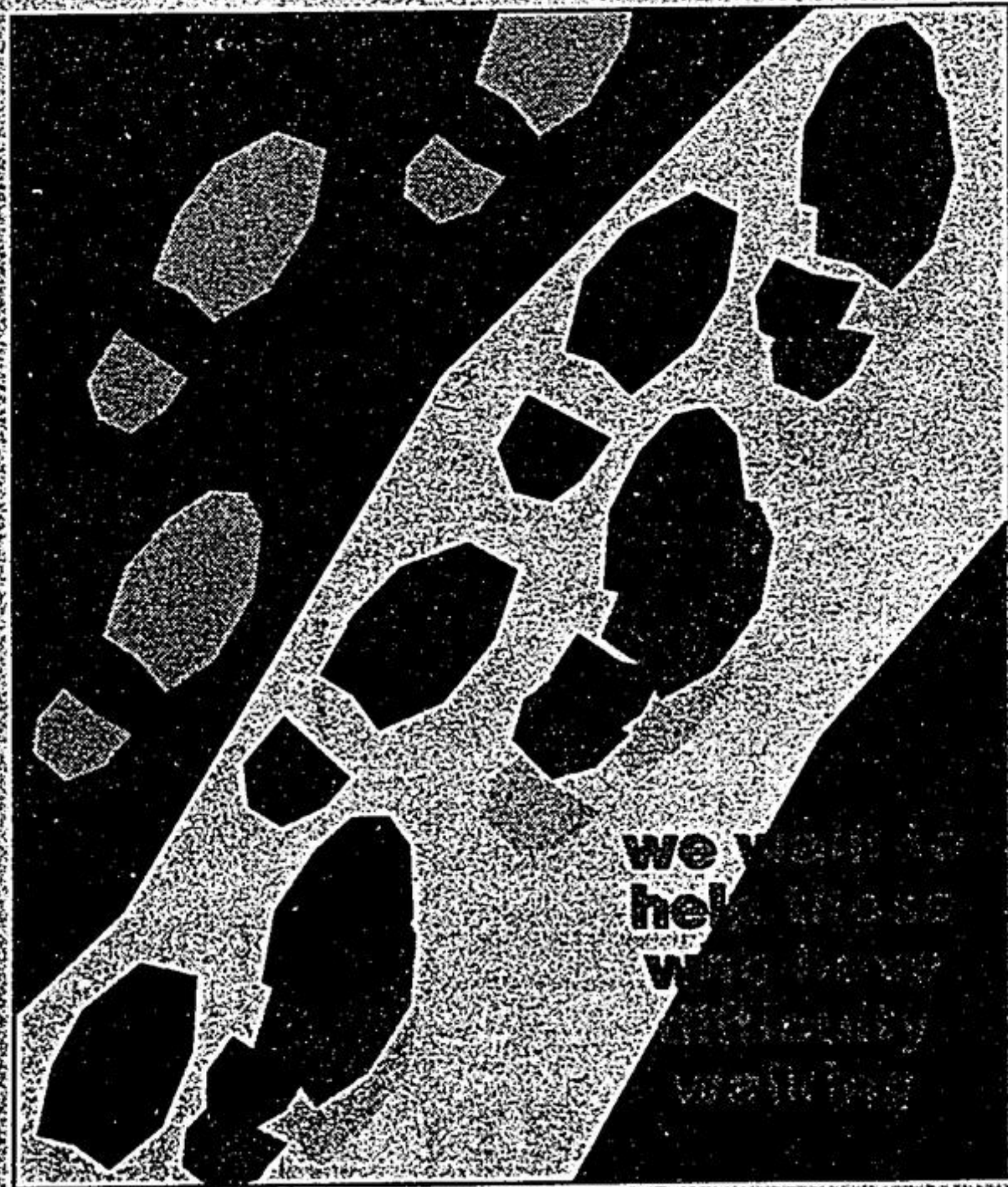
"The most important factor in all of this is that women are ignoring or not aware of the services available to them," Eng added.

A public education campaign is planned including pamphlets and a hard-hitting video that will be available at every social service agency across the region and eventually, it's hoped, across the country.

"We hope to become a bit of a model," Eng said. "York Region is certainly not the only area where this is happening."

For more information, call the centre's toll-free number at 1-800-521-6004.

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