

# The Panel on Violence Against Women

## *Strategy or Smoke Screen?*

*By Marie-Claire Lévesque*

***This article discusses the disadvantages of the Panel on Violence Against Women in light of the government's past record on wife battering issues. The federal government announced a 'family violence initiative' in 1991 while at the same time sabotaging long-term strategies for social and economic equality for women such as child care, jobs, affordable housing, adequate social assistance, pay and employment equity — the very things that give women the economic, physical, and emotional resources to leave abusive relationships, and prevent boys from growing up thinking they have the right to abuse women. The author has serious concerns about the possible misuse of the Panel: as a substitute for immediate action or a smoke screen for inaction. The Panel's recommendations may not be implemented, considering that a number of major recommendations of the 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women have still not been implemented after 21 years.***

Increased calls for a Royal Commission on Violence Against Women have resulted in the establishment of a Panel on

Violence Against Women. The Panel is made up of front-line activists and knowledgeable researchers. The eight women and one man on the Panel are seriously committed to ending violence against women, and will probably issue valuable recommendations when the Panel is due to report in December 1992.

Unfortunately, the federal government has already begun using the Panel as a justification for inaction on violence against women. The standard response in the House of Commons to questions about funding for shelters for battered women, and other measures related to violence, is that the government has set up this Panel which will report at the end of 1992.

In June 1991, the House of Commons Sub-committee on the Status of Women issued an excellent report entitled "War Against Women." After months of research and hearings, the Sub-committee recommended: adequate funding for shelters and rape crisis centres, an effective affordable housing policy, mandatory gender equality training for judges and Members of Parliament, strong and consistent violence-prevention/gender-equality education in schools across the country, and much more. It is unlikely that the Panel will disagree with these recommendations. Yet the government will not implement the recommendations which it already has.

Conveniently, the Panel will be reporting only a few months before a federal election. The government can then come up with a "child care manoeuvre" for the issue of violence against women. Before its election in 1984 and 1988, the govern-

ment promised a national child care program. Seven years later, where is it? A similar fate may await the Panel's recommendations. A wonderful program may be proposed which will never be implemented after the election. Those caring and concerned people who asked for this study should be aware of its use as a political tool.

We know that many of the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in 1970 have still not been implemented, such as the call for a national child care program, homemakers' pensions, equal access to language training for immigrant women, and complete access to family planning education.

The history of federal government action against wife battering is relatively recent: the 1970 report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women does not once mention violence against women in its 167 recommendations or in the body of the report. The first inkling of a federally coordinated approach came with the publication in 1979 of *Toward Equality for Women* in which the government committed itself to undertaking a major study of family violence and crisis assistance in communities. In 1981, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs studied wife battering, and issued its report to Parliament in 1982. The report made recommendations relating to shelter funding, training for police, public education, research, treatment programs for batterers, legal issues and institutional responses. In 1984, a Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Wife Battering was

set up and coordinated by Status of Women Canada. A series of documents was released for each government involved in the working group process in 1986. In June, 1988, the federal government finally made an announcement that it would spend \$40 million over four years on wife battering research, education and assistance. If one in ten Canadian women is battered, this amounts to \$10 per battered woman per year.

Health and Welfare Minister Perrin Beatty announced new 'family violence' initiatives in February 1991. The former defence minister promised \$136 million over four years to deal with wife battering, child abuse and elder abuse. Looking more closely at the distribution of these funds from year to year, one finds that the minister has only committed \$49 million for all types of family violence before the Conservative government's mandate expires in 1993 and an election is called. Only \$21 million of the \$136 million total is allocated to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) for housing-related initiatives, such as second-stage housing and new shelter space creation. This initiative, furthermore, coincides with a \$103 million cut to CMHC overall.

The federal government's 1991 budget heralded further freezes in spending for health and education, and an extension for another three years of the spending limit slapped by the federal government last year on the Canada Assistance Plan payments to British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario, which funds social assistance, child care, and shelters for battered women. The government refuses to give women the resources for long-term strategies to combat violence: jobs, child care, language training for immigrant women, self-government and economic dignity and options for aboriginal peoples, legislation on violent pornography, effective employment and pay equity for visible minority women and disabled women, accessibility — both physical and economic — for disabled women who are at higher risk of violence and have fewer physical and economic options when attempting to leave an abusive relationship.

According to a study by the Ontario Native Women's Association, eight out of ten Native women are battered. Native people are survivors of a residential school system in which they were torn from their families, beaten for speaking their language or observing their traditions and

religion; many were sexually as well as physically abused. They returned with little self-esteem to reserves choked by economic and spiritual collapse or cities in which racism prevented them from obtaining adequate housing and jobs. Aboriginal programs have suffered disproportionately in federal budgets over the past few years. Aboriginal self-government is at the discussion stage only.

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lently violence kit contains documents with sections about violence against disabled women, immigrant and visible minority women, older women and aboriginal women. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats who put together these kits seem to be powerless to force cabinet to act in a coherent and compassionate fashion.

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lence initiative total, has experienced cuts exceeding this amount over the past two years. The government is slashing money from programs that help women, and restoring a small percentage of it in the name of acting on violence against women.

Money for battered women to put together their lives free of violence is not a federal priority. We have seen that the federal government has found \$350 million out of its existing 1990-91 budget for military engagement in the Persian Gulf, and in 1991-92 increased its spending on defence by \$600 million. It has spent millions on the installation of the GST, including \$14 million last year simply to advertise the unwanted tax. These are the issues most important to government. These are the issues it will find resources for at all cost. And who can forget the \$17 million loan to strip clubs two years ago? That in itself exceeds the \$15 million for family violence for 1991-92.

Women are working hard — in shelters, rape crisis centres, in our own lives, in groups — to fight violence against women. We have put the issue on the state's agenda. The government is still at a token response stage. The Panel on Violence Against Women is another token response.

The federal government's rhetoric is more advanced than its actions. The government has quoted the statistic that one in ten women is battered by the man with whom she lives, and its most recent fam-

ily violence kit contains documents with sections about violence against disabled women, immigrant and visible minority women, older women and aboriginal women. Unfortunately, the bureaucrats who put together these kits seem to be powerless to force cabinet to act in a coherent and compassionate fashion. The government tends to overemphasize research and discussion as a strategy for dealing with the problem of wife battering. As Susan Cole wrote in 1982, "if the issue isn't studied to death it may be talked to death." Policy on wife battering can be categorized into four general sets of strategies: research and discussion; education; assistance to survivors and batterers; and restructuring the social system. The preferred government strategies in dealing with wife battering are research/discussion (i.e. setting up a committee and examining the issue further) and education (i.e. increasing awareness). Federal and provincial governments have no unified theory of the causes of battering to inform their decisions. This is why some initiatives are contradictory, and appear haphazard. Neither is there a single unifying concept of how governments should be dealing with the issue of wife battering, or of what it is, to inform funding allocations. No matter how many studies tell governments what to do and how to do it, they just don't follow all of the instructions. It is like putting together do-it-yourself furniture. If there are pieces missing, or one of them doesn't follow the steps, the whole thing could collapse.

Restructuring society to eliminate the conditions under which violence against women is allowed to occur is not a strategy pursued by the federal government. Where it engages in economic restructuring, there is a negative impact on battered women. Feminists have long noted governmental reluctance to stray from the status quo. As Jan Barnsley writes, "institutional research will most often show

how the issue or problem can be dealt with by society's existing problem-solving apparatus, without radical changes being required." What makes us think that after many reports and studies, the government will listen to the Panel's report if it means radically altering the status quo?

The Panel is a feasible option for the federal government because it is easily implemented and visible, because it is not as fiscally or politically costly as assistance or restructuring activities such as income redistribution, and because governments are not bound to implement any of its recommendations.

Currently, measures are being taken in a hodgepodge manner, and the government recognizes in its rhetoric but not yet in its actions the connection between the issue of violence against women and economic inequality, or violence, pornography, and the portrayal of women in the media and in school materials. Feminists must make clear that a Panel is not a substitute for immediate action on violence against women. It can only be an addition to: removing the spending limit on the Canada Assistance Plan, which funds shelters for battered women, child care, programs for the disabled and social assistance; increasing funding for new shelter spaces and rape crisis centres; maintenance of existing shelter spaces including funding for counseling, follow-up, outreach and children, culturally appropriate services for aboriginal and immigrant women; public education, and mandatory training in women's equality issues for judges, court officials and police; and restoration of funding to social housing and job training programs.

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# Building Mishpocheh

By Sandra Butler

**This text is a summary of Sandra Butler's speech to the 1991 Canadian Mental Health Association conference, "Women in a Violent Society." It is reprinted from the Summary Report of that conference.**

The number of women present today illustrates the loneliness and difficulty of the work we do, and the urgency of building *mishpocheh*, or extended family, said Sandra Butler, internationally recognized counsellor and writer on child sexual abuse. In this setting, she said, it is unnecessary to educate the audience about violence against women. Everyone here is aware of the degree to which women "live in exile from our bodies"; we all know the ways in which women "live as prisoners in the castles that are men's homes." As a group, participants at *Women and Mental Health* have gathered to express our concerns, priorities and passions, and to connect with other women.

"As we create community," Butler said, "we combat the isolation and exhaustion, the sense of being overwhelmed by an avalanche.... As this movement expands, we must ensure that it also deepens." Women must ask hard questions, and create our own answers, rather than listening to "gurus" who put forth set answers.

Healing, an important word in the lexicon of feminist therapy, has come to refer to women's journeys through the cobwebs of half-forgotten memory, through the tears which can bring relief. It is a slow, arduous process, in which women eventually come to remember our own history, to appreciate the mechanisms which have enabled us to survive, and finally to move to a place of our own identity, which includes our memories.

"Skillful, empathic healing work has come to be seen as an end in itself," Butler said. "Now it is time to ask whether feminist therapy became too much therapy and

not enough feminism." It is important to use our psychological skills in the service of social change work, she emphasized. "The focus should not be on individual healing, but on doing what we set out to do in the first place, and that is ending violence against women."

The question of what is meant by "wellness" is also fundamental: we are now seeing the effects of poisons which are drawn into people's bodies, and which concentrate in women's sensitive reproductive organs. "Every 10 minutes, a woman dies of breast cancer," Butler said, noting that last year alone, this disease claimed 44,500 women—more than the total number of deaths from AIDS since that epidemic began. Ironically, people suffering from disorders of the immune system are now faced with "a barrage of psychobabble," which states that not only do we create our own wellness, but our illnesses, too. This ignores factors such as capitalism, pollution and toxic dumps, and violence against women and children. "It is the same consciousness that invades the body of a little child that invades Grenada or Nicaragua," Butler said.

She stressed that she was not describing these widening spirals of violence in order to overwhelm or paralyze, but rather to remind us of the danger of the masculinist hierarchy that defines women's lives. "We are all engaged in the same struggle on different fronts," Butler said, noting that to be involved in the struggle against misogyny is to be part of the larger movement for liberation around the world.

"What does it mean to say that we are 'empowering' women, in a world where women still have no power?" she asked. There is an inward focus involved in much of the work of recovery, but once the "first 11 steps" have been completed, it is crucial that the message be carried outward. "Recovery is an important first step, but must not be an ending," Butler emphasized. "Our world must begin to expand,