

# Violence Against Women

## *Race, Class and Gender Issues*

BY RITA KOHLI

*The Massacre of the fourteen women was a monstrosity of male violence. In particular it spoke to the challenges that feminism poses to patriarchy and also the vulnerability of feminists to the reactionary consequences of challenging male entitlement. I also wish to share with you a different facet of the picture and therein raise some questions and sentiments shared by many such as I who are not white or middle class. I wrote this poem at the time of the Montreal Massacre when chaos, grief and outrage gripped us all.*

### *Musings of a South Asian Woman in the Wake of the Montreal Massacre*

In the wake of the Montreal Massacre  
Indeed the number 14  
Indeed the name Marc Lépine  
Will be etched in our minds  
And herstory.

14 women  
14 white women  
14 white middle-class women  
Selected...  
Targets...

Fell...  
Victim...  
Dead...  
A statement  
Of widespread misogyny.

Yes  
I, a non-white woman  
A woman of Colour  
Raged...  
Mourned...  
Grieved...  
With you  
The white counterparts of the feminist  
community.

And No  
I could not  
Rage, mourn or grieve  
with you  
As you would have liked me to  
For you have yet

To cross the barriers of race, class and  
sexuality  
To... Rage  
Mourn  
Grieve  
And Resist  
The daily violence  
On the street  
In the home  
In our lives  
The lives of non-white women and white-  
working class women.

Did you know  
In Rexdale 2 Black women  
And 1 South Asian woman  
Were shot at  
Just before the Massacre?  
Did you?  
No.  
I am not surprised  
I hear that  
Answer so many times.

Can't you see  
White or Black  
We are in it  
Together  
And only in coming together  
Will there be freedom  
For you, me and us  
For no woman is free  
Till all women are free.

Until then  
I  
Rage...  
Mourn...  
Grieve...  
And  
Resist  
With  
A difference.

*A*s long as the lives of women who are not white and middle-class are regarded as less valuable than our bourgeois counterparts, the struggle to end violence against women will remain an impossibility. Unless we acknowledge that indeed the "personal is political," but the same varies depending on our race, class, sexuality, religion, etc., we will remain divided and male domination will prevail. As Audre Lorde says "the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house."

Without doubt, the women's movement has contributed to the advancement of women's status by bringing visibility to women's issues as political issues. However, I put forward the question: Has the movement benefited *all* women and *all* women *equitably*? The answer is "no." The issues of poverty, racism and heterosexism have not been addressed and as such the plights of working-class women, immigrant women and women of differ-

ing racial and cultural backgrounds continue to remain relatively unaltered. In fact, I will go so far as to state that if these women were as valued as white bourgeois women, we would all be out on the streets protesting every time any woman fell victim to misogyny. The reality is that as much as women need to organize against the oppressive institutions of patriarchy and white supremacy, we simultaneously need to challenge and transform the "patriarch" that we have internalized. We need to deconstruct the hierarchy (with its corresponding power and privilege) that the ideology of patriarchy and white supremacy create. Instead of fearing difference (accompanied by hating difference), we need to examine who benefits from these differences. Just as males, white males in particular, benefit from these divisions, so too do white bourgeois women. There can be no equality until the issues of race, class and heterosexuality are dealt with, not as an add on, but as issues of equal importance to gender issues.

Although there are shelters, rape crisis centres and crisis lines to assist women and children experiencing violence, violence and misogyny are on the increase and many women and children seeking these services are turned away. This speaks to the need not only to increase services but also to collectively address and redress the institutional basis of women hating and male supremacist notions endemic in every structure of society. The legal and medical systems, and the police have implemented some policies to assist women experiencing violence, but at best these systems are experienced by women as punitive and disempowering. This is particularly true for immigrant and refugee women, and women of different races. The state directives to police to lay charges when there is reasonable grounds in incidents of wife assault are ineffective given

the lack of political will to implement the same. The legal system continues to disbelieve women and puts them on trial. It sanctions violence against women by allowing batterers, rapists and child molesters to get off lightly with a very low conviction rate, the exceptions being cases involving non-white players. Women seeking medical interventions for injuries sustained through male violence go unidentified. This comes as no surprise as these institutions are male dominated and not exempt from the practices of misogyny, racism, sexism and homophobia.

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Then there is the practice of multiculturalism which does not recognize power inequities based in race and religion, and aims at creating homogeneity. To top it all, the lack of political will of the state was glaringly evident in the recent cutbacks in funding to women's organizations.

My experiences in various shelters in Metropolitan Toronto support the view that an analysis of race, class and sexuality is imperative to empower women who seek refuge. That the basic needs of poor women, and in particular refugee and non-white women, must be addressed. The case of Grace Botang, a refugee woman killed by her separated partner, is still

fresh in our memories. There are many others who have been harassed and killed after leaving their abusive partners, as well as those killed in their homes. To date refugee women do not qualify for subsidized housing offered through the battered women's priority policy. How is empowerment possible when women's basic needs of food, shelter and safety are not assured?

The Women's Movement needs to organize so that the daily violence in our lives is addressed. There is a need to examine how we are co-opted by the state and duped into complacency. There is a need as we work towards a violence-free life to celebrate our sacredness and heal and nurture ourselves. Because women's personal freedom to make choices and control our lives and bodies, within and outside the home, is constricted and denied, we must continue to speak of oppression. I do believe that the end to this oppression will come and it will come from women's organized resistance and activism. We and the women to come are not going to settle for anything less than our dignity and integrity being restored, whatever the cost. The question is, are we as women from diverse backgrounds prepared to transform our politics? Or are we going to remain divided and allow male dominance to prevail? After all it is said that when women get together miracles can happen. Why else are we divided by patriarchy?

To conclude I would like to honour all the women who have been killed by violent males. Their struggles will not go unremembered.

*This article was adapted from a presentation given by Rita Kohli as part of a panel discussion on Violence Against Women, organized by the Toronto Women Artists Community and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.*

