Keeping Women in Our Place

Violence at Canadian Universities

BY DEBBIE WISE HARRIS

The news media is an influential tool for the dissemination and perpetuation of ideology. It is my project here to "deconstruct" the mechanisms in public discourse that work to explain and justify male violence against women. Using the example of public violence and threats of violence against women university students in Canada, I suggest the current public discourse operates within a sort of post-feminism that helps construct a justification for violence against women in general, and "feminists" in particular.

Ostensibly, much has changed since the late nineteenth century when women were barred from attending universities, did not have the vote and were not considered "people" in this country. It is difficult to imagine any current public discourse that supports the notion women should be institutionally barred from social participation. In a sense, however, the oppression has gone "underground." We may not have a discourse that publicly adheres to an ideology of sexual difference and female inferiority; but we do have a public discourse that is impatient with women's fight for equality, because women *have long been declared equal.* It is arguable that the "powers that be" are infinitely adaptable, making persuasive and visible concessions that give the impression, rather than the experience, of women's equality. Access to higher education, suffrage, token women permitted to succeed within the system, even employment and pay equity programs (each achieved through the hard work of the women's movement of the last hundred years), have removed visible barriers to women's oppression. But an ideological barrier has gone up in their place.

The university campus is a site of a falsified perception of women's equality. Women and men live together on university campuses, or side by side in adjoining residences. There do not appear to be any overt forms of exclusion. Middle-class women and men attend university in roughly the same proportion at the undergraduate level.[1] Of course, this statistic belies a number of important details about the concentration of women in traditional fields like nursing, education and social work, and about women's near absence in some science programs, like engineering and mathematics. It also renders invisible the "exchange value" of a woman's undergraduate university degree, which is considerably lower than that of a similarly educated man.[2] Yet, the sheer numbers, unexplained and uncriticized, support the notion that women have "made it" and, perhaps, that any efforts to further advance women are examples of "reverse discrimination."

University students may have the impression that their exposure and access to female professors is increasing at a proportionately significant rate. This is not the case. A report about employment equity in Ontario universities reveals that women comprise 17.4 per cent of total faculty.[3] Within this 17.4 per cent they represent between 47-50 per cent of the lowest ranked jobs and only 5.8 per cent of the best. Policies dealing with employment equity and sexual harassment bring women's concerns into the public discourse. However, they do not necessarily manifest a resolution of the inequities faced by women. The impression is that women are "equal." It is important to acknowledge that while the words — the official policies — have changed, the song more or less remains the same. The rash of public violence against university women has very strong historical roots.

On December 7, 1882, four women walked out of a lecture hall and into a public discourse that continues to affect women university students more than one hundred years later. Gaining even token access to medical school (and to other professional faculties) was a long and difficult struggle for women. But in April of 1880, four women — the few who could meet the stringent requirements, pay the expensive fees and bear the summer heat — were finally, albeit partially, admitted to the medical school at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. Initially, the women had to study during a separate summer period. They were slowly integrated into some lectures with their male counterparts in the next year, but continued to study "sensitive" topics, like anatomy and obstetrics, in isolation.[4] On that December day in 1882, Dr. Fenwick and some of his male students sexually belittled and harassed the women until they left the class, embarrassed and disgusted. In the words of one of the women, Elizabeth Smith,

> ...*proper order was not maintained, delicate points in physiology being received with vulgar levity unbecoming to gentlemen. The professor had occasion, in the course of his lecture, to make a reference which was greeted with cheers by a few of the students. This was not checked. A few minutes later he saw fit to mention a fact through the expression of which as a physiological truth we could not object, but he began to enlarge on its social effects and it was applauded by some of the [male] students, which applause, instead of being immediately and severely reproved, was responded to by repetition and further enlargement including an uproarious and vulgar demonstration.*[5]

There was quite a reaction to this episode, but it was not a reaction against the inappropriate, even reprehensible, behaviour of the professor and the male students. It was a reaction against the female students! Drawing on hostility that must have been brewing below the surface, a group of men gathered

signatures on a petition, demanding that the women students be barred from the medical school and that women no longer be admitted. The petition also threatened that the male students would abandon the school if their demands were not met.

Sympathy for the men was forthcoming, both in response to the petition and in the press, as public opinion swiftly polarized against the women. *The Bystander* cautioned that,

the result of [the women's] movement carried to the extreme to which some of them would carry it, must be not merely the concession to them hitherto confined to men, but a general change of relations between the sexes, with serious consequences perhaps, to such of the female sex as do not wish to become lawyers or physicians.[6]

Fearing that the college's reputation would be indelibly sullied by the mass exodus of the male students to another school, and caving in to public opinion, Queen's conceded to some of their demands, revoking future women's admissions, and again separating out the four women from regular medical classrooms.

The construction of this sequence of events begs closer analysis. It contains elements of how the public discourse currently constructs/reconstructs violence against university women. The amazing thing was how adept some men were at inverting their own act of violence — violence perpetrated against women who were seen to be rejecting traditional roles and usurping male privilege — and not only justifying the violence, but also ultimately blaming and punishing the victims for their reaction to the violence. The mechanism is as follows: first, there is an action by some men that threatens and/or reinscribes women as sexual beings, or as beings limited by their biology; second, there is a negative reaction by women who object to the initial action; third, there is a frame shift that resettles the focus of public debate not onto the perpetrators, but onto their justified reasons for having behaved as they did. In other words, the women, their negative reaction and their very presence are blamed for the action, and not the men who committed it or the ideology that fosters it.

Male violence against women continues as a systemically sanctioned form of violence in this culture. Most women know

that in many respects violence against women is not conceptualized as "punishable crime." The justifications for and legitimations of partner/date/courtship rape or battering, sexual harassment and even stranger rape are well-known. The mechanism at work is one which refocuses blame onto the victim: she did something to bring harm to herself, or she didn't do something to prevent harm from coming to herself. I want to speculate as to how this frame of understanding gets perpetuated within the popular understanding of violence against women, and how the history of women's sexual and economic oppression is kept alive within the public discourse around violence against women today.

When a rape victim is blamed for having stepped outside the inscribed boundaries of safety or sexuality, the frame of understanding about the violence is shifted away from the perpetrator and onto the victim. Earlier this year, a student housing director, Brian Johnston, at Newfoundland's Memorial University quoted in *The Muse* said: "I understand the student who was assaulted didn't take some of the precautions she should have" ("Woman Raped on Memorial's Campus," 08/03/90). A naturalized form of women's activities is assumed, placing the onus on women to curb their public activities and to watch vigilantly that they do not provoke men, either sexually or through their own anger. Women's behaviour — our transgressing the limits of "acceptable" female activity — is understood as the cause of the violence against us. Men's violence is understood as a legitimate form of regulation, of keeping women in their proper place.

And the university, it would seem, is one place where we are not altogether welcome. I did a cross-Canada search for articles concerning violence against women on university campuses from 1988 through to the beginning of the 1990 academic year. I hoped to understand some of the cultural meanings of these events and to further investigate the mechanisms which construct and legitimize them.

I chose to investigate thoroughly the reports of two contemporary examples of public violence against university women students. To describe the acts, I have clipped paragraphs from the news articles/columns that first reported the stories. The first incident occurred at Wilfred

Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario and was reported by Michele Landsberg in a front-page exposé:

Late in September, the first-year men were roused from their sleep to "raid" the women's dorm. The next morning, students arriving in the main dining hall for breakfast were astounded to see walls plastered with crude hand-made posters, flaunting women's underpants, some of which had been decorated with ketchup and other gunk to represent blood and feces.

Each panty was captioned. One example: "Do you take VISA?" Emblazoned over a drawing of female genitalia was an obscenity. Other insults were too gross to repeat here, (Toronto Star, *October 25, 1989*).

The second act took place at Queen's and was reported across the country:

Obscene and violent messages displayed in the windows of a men's residence at Queen's University have sparked a heated battle of the sexes.

The signs at the university's Gordon House ridiculed the annual No Means No rape awareness campaign now under way at the university...

No Means Dyke and No Means Tie Me Up were among the messages displayed three weeks ago by male students mocking the campaign. (Montreal Gazette, *November 3, 1990*).

Among other examples are the murder of 14 women and wounding of many others at l'École polytechnique, an engineering school at the Université de Montréal, on December 6, 1989, and the distribution of written threats of extreme sexual violence on October 11, 1990 to 300 University of British Columbia women students while they slept. It is important to assert the connections between and among these episodes of violence because it helps to dispel the powerful, silencing notion that they are isolated incidents that have nothing to do with one another, or with the oppression of women. As Pat Mahony notes,

Of course we find stories of women, young and old, being brutally raped and murdered shocking and sickening, but the longer we continue to collude with the collective "SHOCK!", the longer will each case stand in isolation from the rest as an individualized, unique event.[7]

We must list these events, reassert their connections and understand them as a catalogue of reported episodes both on the continuum of violence against university women, and against all women.
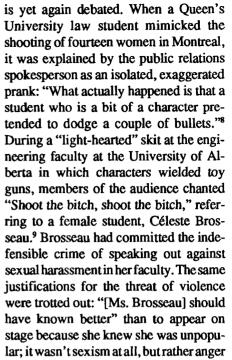
News reports help to keep the examples of violence against women university students (and women in general) separate and unlinked, and help prevent patterns of oppression from being identified.
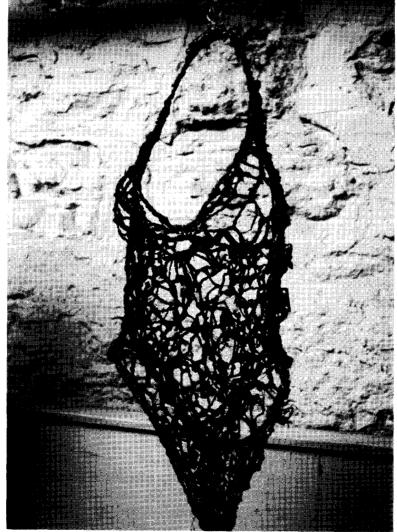
The reports of public violence against university women tend to operate within the confines of the question: "Is this or isn't this a pattern?" Most of the articles concerned with threats of violence against university women quote the opinions of members of the university community. Through the selection process of whose opinion is published – of who gets to speak – the meaning of the event is constructed. So, in an early analysis of the display of women's underwear at Laurier University, the first student quoted is Mike Bolton. His opinion, that "the dining hall display, in which panties were tacked to a poster with crude comments and taped on the wall, was a tasteless, but isolated incident" (*Toronto Star*, October 26, 1989) is legitimized as "representative" of popular campus opinion. A similar "isolating" mechanism helped re-frame the murder of fourteen women in Montreal from an extreme expression of the cultural regulation and hatred of women to the inexplicable actions of an individual mad-man. The very term coined to describe the murders, "the Montreal Massacre," helps to contain the murders as a "massacre" in the American tradition: a random, indiscriminate act of incomprehensible violence committed by a mad individual for pathological reasons. News reports gave pathology profiles of the "mad man," plastered his picture across the front pages of newspapers from coast to coast, pathologized his childhood and his relation-

ships with women, and thus transformed his self-declared anti-feminist political statement into the ravings of a crazy man. (See "Campus Gunman a Loser at Love: War-Film Fanatic Had No Girlfriends" *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 8, 1989; "'Frustrated by Women': Killer War-Film Fanatic" *Calgary Herald*, December 8, 1989.) A University of Toronto professor declared his outrage that the murders of the women could be understood as anything other than an isolated incident: "The mass murder of several women by one sexist lunatic does not justify the mass character assassination of all men by other sexist lunatics" (Letter to the editor, by P.C. Hughes. *CAUT Bulletin*, April 1990).

Even when "incidents" resemble other acts of violence or threats of violence, their resemblance is not enough to assume a pattern within the public discourse, and the dichotomy of "is it or isn't it" a pattern

Teresa Dobrowlska, detail from "The Viewing Room" (1990). Exhibited in Healing Images, Toronto.

is yet again debated. When a Queen's University law student mimicked the shooting of fourteen women in Montreal, it was explained by the public relations spokesperson as an isolated, exaggerated prank: "What actually happened is that a student who is a bit of a character pretended to dodge a couple of bullets."[8] During a "light-hearted" skit at the engineering faculty at the University of Alberta in which characters wielded toy guns, members of the audience chanted "Shoot the bitch, shoot the bitch," referring to a female student, Céleste Brosseau.[9] Brosseau had committed the indefensible crime of speaking out against sexual harassment in her faculty. The same justifications for the threat of violence were trotted out: "[Ms. Brosseau] should have known better" than to appear on stage because she knew she was unpopular; it wasn't sexism at all, but rather anger at a traitorous individual. There was an unmistakable connection to violence and hatred of women in this act that so closely mimicked the murders in Montreal, and yet it was denied. But perhaps most terrifying of all, was the voice of a male professor who had no difficulty making the connections: "It would not surprise me if one of the demons that tortured Marc Lepine was the steady torrent of abuse directed at men in general by too many feminists." The legitimizing of extreme violence against feminists is a notion to which I will return later.

A similar form of regulating the meaning of and the response to these public incidences of violence is through the construction of "over-reaction." In the tradition of "is it or isn't it an innocent prank?" In a report about the events at Laurier, author Kim Zarzour writes: "Many people on campus considered the panty raids to be innocent, adolescent pranks, but others saw them as an assault on women" (*Toronto Star*, October 29, 1989). The debate is constructed as a po-

larity between "prank" or "assault on women," without any further analysis of the continuum of violence. As Kathleen Hirsch points out:

> Unlike widely publicized gang rapes that conform to class and racial stereotypes, this crime, if committed behind a fraternity's doors, becomes a boy's prank – or even a sanctioned rite of passage into the grown-up world of male dominance, privilege and power (Ms. Magazine. September/October, 1990).

This "innocent" characterization of extreme violence against women is a dangerous construction. It denies any guilt or wrong-doing associated with the violence, and forbids feminists the right to speak out against the violence. If they do, they are reinscribed as humourless, as exaggerating.

Within the post-feminism that pervades the discourse on violence against women at universities, is the notion that women and men are engaged in a "battle" or a "war" of the sexes. This is a false symmetry of power. It suggests that women and men have an equal chance of winning whatever battle is at hand (Wilden, 1980). This notion of a "level playing field" is used continually in the public discourse about the threats of violence by men to women on university campuses.

With power dynamics hidden or neutralized, it is not long before an inversion of power is constructed within the public discourse. If women and men are conceived of as having equal power within social institutions, then what can be made of "feminists" within the public discourse? Feminists very quickly "steal" the frame in the so-called battle of the sexes on university campuses. As the Taking Liberties Collective notes, separating feminists out from "regular" women is, in effect, strategic: "The strategy of divide and rule is used again to mark out feminists as extremists who are against the interest of 'ordinary,' 'normal' women."[10] Joan Baril identifies this same "marking" of feminists in the context of the aftermath of the murders in Montreal: "One also sees the constant attempt to differentiate between women and feminists. According to this definition, feminists are extremists, while women, on the other hand, are not extremist because 'they don't make an issue of things.'"[11] Women — natural

women, real women — are silent. They behave as they ought to.

Women who do not identify themselves as feminist often internalize this distinction and separate themselves out within the public discourse, either by supporting the men whose actions precipitated the debate, or by denouncing feminists. One woman at the University of British Columbia worried that the men who had sent sexually threatening invitations were being persecuted: "It's hard on the guys".[12] A female engineering student explains that although she studies in a non-traditional discipline, she is not a feminist: "I'm just a regular girl who excels in math and science. Feminists... are those in the women's movement almost attacking everything. A lot of times they exaggerate things; they're a little too defensive..."[13]

The reports of violence against women university students construct the same differentiation between "feminists" and the "rest of us," polarizing popular opinion against the "extremist" views of "the few." Regarding the signs at Queen's, we find comments like: "As for the feminists, I find it a little disheartening to realize that a small vocal minority can twist things and make something very minor, taken lightly by most, into international news" (Toronto Star, Nov. 5, 1989); and "[The men] feel bombarded, their intelligence insulted by a glut of feminist propaganda and activists who think women are superior" (Toronto Star, Nov. 27, 1989).

Feminist concerns are characterized as antiquated and out-of-touch. Dr. Stewart said she had detected a backlash. "Three years ago there was a lot of post-feminism irritation with the stridency of the older generation of feminists."[14] ("Like many students interviewed by The Star, they blame 'radical feminists' who they claim are outdated and abrasive."[15]) And in a dangerous twist, or inversion, the contemporary discourse is situated in a kind of "post-feminism" where out-moded concerns of feminists rightly lead to hostility against them: "'The antagonism is more likely directed at feminists,' says Caporrella, who is president of the engineers' society at her university. Like many other students interviewed, she says the women's movement is out of step with the times. Their times."[16]

Feminists are also portrayed as attempting to "capitalize" on tragedy and on "minor" incidents for their own po-

litical purposes. This characterization constructs feminists who try to make the dangerous connections about the continuum of male violence against women, as sinister and exploitative. One male electronics engineer is asked to comment on the "massacre": "I can see their point, to a certain degree... There is too much violence against women. But [feminists] want to make it come across that all men hate women and want to beat them up. It's the fanaticism, the one-sidedness of their approach that bothers me."[17] A woman resident at the University of British Columbia denies the connections between threats of violence and its manifestation: "'We are not laughing at rape,'(Sara) Campbell said.'This is not a rape issue. We treated the letters seriously, but it has all got out of hand. (The protestors) are distorting and using this issue for themselves.'"[18] And a Toronto Star columnist wrote:

> ...the conflictual wing of the feminist movement, particularly outside Quebec, is in the process of hijacking last Wednesday's tragedy for its own ends.
> It's of little solace to the families of the victims, but the women killed at Polytechnique are much more symbols of a battle that is in the process of being won than of the kind of all-pervasive persecution conjured up by some feminist extremists.[19]

Look at the word choice here. Not only are these so-called extremists inventing and exaggerating the persecution of women but, like witches, they are "conjuring" it up.

This construction of feminists as extremist, as radical, as even witch-like finds expression in the justification of extreme violence against them. Feminists are depicted as "strident bitches"[20]; as "Nazis, lesbians and radicals"[21]; they are characterized as unnatural, as man-hating, as "the Third Sex".[22] As such, it seems, they are subject to extraordinary and legitimized sanction. And again, feminists are blamed for the acts of hostility that "they have driven men to commit." In this passage from the 1928 edition of the Malleus Maleficarum (1486), the fifteenth-century witch-hunters' "bible," Montague Summers is no apologist for this anti-woman text:

> ...exaggerated as these [misogynistic passages] may be, I am not altogether certain that they will not prove a whole-

some and needed antidote in this feministic age, when sexes seem confounded, and it appears to be the chief object of many females to ape the man, an indecorum by which they not only divest themselves of such charm as they might boast, but lay themselves open to the sternest reprobation in the name of sanity and common sense. For the Apostle Saint Peter says: "Let wives be subjects to their husbands..."

Echoing a similar sentiment, Thunder Bay's newspaper declared that the murder of fourteen women in Montreal was caused by "the divisions created in Canadian society by the mere presence of the women's movement,"[23] and not by the misogyny of Canadian society.

The threats of bodily harm that feminists endure stand in contrast to the public violence against women students that has been so thoroughly reported. The nature of the initial actions taken by men against women are different from the all-out offensive against feminists. The nature of the initial threats (literally at Queens, but figuratively at Laurier and British Columbia[24]) is not "kick her in the teeth," but rather "if she says no, kick her in the teeth." It is only in a woman's transgression — her asserting her right to say no — that she need fear the *manifestation* of violence. If she stays within the limits of acceptable behaviour (i.e. assenting to male will/power) she is, according to this discourse, "safe." Feminists, on the other hand, with their rear-guard reactions to these "harmless pranks," must suffer the consequences of transgression. At Queen's, individual women were harassed, while further public threats — this time against feminists — went virtually unnoticed in the press:

The women [protesting the signs at Queen's University] said they feared physical and verbal abuse. They said they called off a protest on a field outside the residences recently when about 20 male students showed up to play baseball — each carrying a bat.[25]

At Laurier, a surge of anger menaced the individuals who had protested the panty raids, with many of them "afraid to walk alone on campus."[26]

Less than a month after the murders in Montreal, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, a poster announcing research about how women come into feminist consciousness was defaced with

the threat: "Shoot them." This was never reported in the press.

Reconstructing the mechanisms at work within the public discourse that legitimize the threats against university women, and sanction violence against feminist university women, we discover a pattern. First, there is a reassertion of women's "natural roles," made explicit by a reinscription in sexually vulnerable terms: "no means tie her up"; panties smeared with material resembling blood and feces displayed with obscene captions; "suck your nipples until they bleed." Then, when feminists react negatively, there is a violent reaction against their dissension. Those who dissent are threatened and deemed unnatural. The frame of the public discourse then shifts away from the initial act or threat of violence, and onto the (in)appropriateness of the reaction by feminists.

The struggle to keep women in "their place" is the political/economic struggle to maintain that place as a place of male privilege and power over women. The final way to ensure compliance is through violence or the threat of violence. As Jalna Hammer argues, "all systems of oppression employ violence or the threat of violence as an institutionalized way of ensuring compliance. Power relations are always underpinned by the threat and, if necessary, overt use of force." [27] When women resist the restrictive definitions of their social/sexual role, they are depicted in the public discourse as violating a normative standard, and an enormous amount of violence is justified against them. We must make visible the ways in which violence against women in general, and violence against feminists specifically, is legitimized, and the ways in which the public discourses in turn legitimize inaction in coping with violence in public policy and at the level of the university and the state.

[1] Evelyn Gigantes, *Canadian Women at Work: Their Situation, Their Union Status and the Influence of the Public Sector.* National Union of Provincial Government Employees. (Ottawa: 1989), p. 12.

[2] *ibid*, pp. 2-3.

[3] *Employment Equity in Post Secondary Institutions* (Ontario, 1989), p. 8.

[4] Anna Temple, pp. 107-110.

[5] *British Whig*, December 18, 1882 as quoted in Temple, p. 111.

[6] *The Bystander 3*, Jan 1883, as quoted in Temple, pp. 69-70.

[7] Pat Mahony, *Learning our Lines* (London: 1989), p. 170.

[8] Richard Bowman, director of public relations for Queen's University, as reported in *The Globe and Mail*, Dec. 12, 1989.

[9] All of the references in this paragraph are cited from "University Fights Outbreak of Sexism Virus" *Globe and Mail*, April 25, 1990.

[10] *Learning the Hard Way*, p. 176.

[11] Joan Baril, "The Centre of the Backlash" (Thunder Bay. Unpublished paper, 1990).

[12] "Brother No More at UBC Dorms" *Globe and Mail*, October 18, 1990.

[13] *Toronto Star*, November 27, 1989

[14] *Globe and Mail*, November 11, 1989.

[15] *Toronto Star*, November 27, 1989.

[16] *ibid.*

[17] *ibid.*, December 13, 1989.

[18] *The Varsity*, October 22, 1990. "UBC Rez Students Clash Over Letters."

[19] *Toronto Star*, December 12, 1989.

[20] *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 6, 1990.

[21] *Toronto Star*, Nov. 27, 1990.

[22] Goldwyn Smith, "... to direct the aspirations of women away from marriage to the path of intellectual ambition is the tendency and even the object of the whole movement...We seem destined to have some of our Canadian maidens turned into counterparts of the Third Sex, declining matrimony and knowing how to avoid it." *The Week 1*, March 20, 1884, p. 224.

[23] As reported in Joan Baril's "The Centre of the BackLash" (Thunder Bay, 1990).

[24] Reports of the UBC threats describe the "invitations" as containing such threats as: "I'll pound your cervix into a pulp" and "suck your nipples until they bleed," threats which reinscribe women as sexually controllable/vulnerable. *Ryerson Eyeopener*, October 24, 1990

[25] *Calgary Herald*, Nov. 10, 1989.

[26] *Kitchener Waterloo Record*, October 27, 1989.

[27] *Learning our Lines*. London: 1989. p. 143.

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