

At School on the Street

BY MARY O'BRIEN

WAVAW, however latently, lives! Many Canadian and international women's groups working against male violence against women have adopted the acronym because it explicitly describes their work and unites them in a global sisterhood attempting to provide the strategies of resistance invoked below by Mary O'Brien. Her article "At School on the Street" was published in 1978, in the first issue of CWS/cf.

Although the Toronto chapter of WAVAW hasn't been active recently, there are many active WAVAW or WAVAW-like groups across Canada and the United States, including two in Vancouver. As a loosely structured network of groups organizing protests, vigils and other street actions whenever the need arises, and doing public education and anti-pornography work on a continuing informal basis, WAVAW is insidious in the best possible sense of the word — an ongoing political force without cumbersome and expensive bureaucracy.

Violence against women is the central issue of the international women's movement. Male violence knows no borders — it crosses class, race, nationality and age — and women, in solidarity, are working to develop and share the strategies to resist it. Violence Against Women and Violence Against Women: Strategies for Change the two forthcoming issues of CWS/cf for 1991, will contribute to this struggle.

The most remarkable thing about the young woman on Toronto's Yonge Street was the look of sheer astonishment on her face. She was wearing the usual student uniform, but the jeans were well cut, the sneakers by Adidas, and the jacket a nicely lined piece of English wool. Prosperous, on the whole, and perhaps for that reason more astonished: she was, after all, being assaulted. Had she, like the girl beside her, been raised in Regent Park, she would have been less surprised that her assailants were policemen. Meanwhile, grabbing frantically at her sliding glasses, she was part of a tightly woven web of women who were steadily being pushed off the sidewalk by a disciplined wedge of Toronto's Finest. As she said afterwards, "Now, *that's* education!"

This was a chilly Saturday evening in November 1977. It had all started in a serious but good-tempered enough way. Some months before this street scuffle, a group of Toronto feminists had put together a coalition to plan a protest march under the banner of WAVAW — Women Against Violence Against Women. Their concern was sparked by proliferating evidence of a rise in all those indicators by which tiny parts of violence against women escape the anonymity of "private" life and make slim headlines on the inside pages of the public prints. Increases

in reported rape, wife beating, and child abuse, together with the profitable proliferation of women hating and sado-masochistic entertainment and advertising, were causing a wave of anger and concern among women, but very little constructive response from the male-dominated institutions of our society. WAVAW was formed to raise the visibility of this fact of female life, and to alert women to the need for concrete action.

It was quite by coincidence that one of the sleazy movie pits on lower Yonge Street booked in *Snuff* a few days before the march was scheduled to take place. *Snuff* had become a feminist *cause célèbre* in the United States. It was something a little different from the usual run of blue movies and masochism for the masses with which the hard-core porn industry creates and meets the needs of frustrated sadists. The makers of *Snuff* were attempting to turn an honest dollar by cashing in on cultism of the Charles Manson type. Women were not only to be depicted as enjoying degradation and torture on the fictional level; the movie makers claimed to have turned mere fables of victims and masters into a more authentic thrill: they advertised that the woman who was subjected to death by slow dismemberment in the film was a real live woman being destroyed for the edification and orgasmic delight of her real murderer, and for the vicarious pleasure of red-blooded American boys. It is still not clear whether this claim was in fact a genuine one. According to the film's producers, the woman in question was an obscure and expendable native of South America, and no one either missed her or cared about her. The murderers were clearly to be a master race as well as a master sex.

U.S. feminists were outraged. Whether or not a woman had actually died, the message of the movie was that women's lives are insignificant, and that women will gladly suffer mutilation and death so that the sexual needs of their natural masters, however kinky, can be met. More importantly, the movie proclaimed a new genre in the endless annals of woman-hating and woman-baiting, an adventure in celluloid which "raised" merely legitimate abuse of women to a religious level. What was planned was the creation of a new popular cult. Every Man a Manson; that was the giddy promise. The movie opened a vista of a high priesthood of Real Men in which orgasm by murder became a sacrament of the cult of the penis rampant, and the sin of being female could be expiated only in violence and blood-sacrifice. The fact that all this spiritual heroism was depicted in low-budget movies featuring ham acting, banal dialogue, and technologically crude cinematography was unimportant. When you're turned on at that level, man, you don't pause for aesthetic quibbles. Feminist protest demonstrations were organized in a

number of American cities, leading to confrontations and many arrests.

Confronted with this masterpiece, the Censor Board decided that the actual dismemberment of the woman was rather strong stuff for refined Ontario stomachs. That would be cut. Otherwise, the movie was O.K. In fact, it wasn't really "pornographic"; there was no overt sex in it. Feminists, of course, do not generally share the censors' view that sex is pornographic. Like most people outside the Theatre Branch, they hold the view that sex is a natural phenomenon and that non-exploitative sex is rather beautiful. For our political masters, evidently, exploitation is fine but sexuality is nasty, and especially nasty when nude.

This, then, was the movie which was being shown on the very route which the WAVAW protest march had the permission of civic authorities to travel. Many of the women who came to the march wanted to centre the demonstration on the theatre and attempt to close down the "show." The organizers of the march demurred. They had a carefully planned and legal program, including some excellent street theatre, and they were understandably concerned that a violent confrontation would jeopardize the effectiveness of feminist street politics in the future. After heated debate, a compromise was reached: after the scheduled events were completed, women who felt strongly about the film would return to the cinema and make their protest.

What happened turned lower Yonge Street into something that resembled the set for *Dog Day Afternoon*. Only the helicopters were missing. A group of women erupted into the theatre, and the swiftness of this invasion stopped the movie. Scuffles broke out with the theatre staff who, with the outnumbered pair of cops who had tagged along from the march escort, called the riot squad. Five people—three women and two men—were arrested and charged with offences ranging from public mischief to possession of a weapon (a decorative penknife). Yonge Street was barricaded off for a couple of blocks, crowds gathered, paddy wagons purred off, and the couple of hundred unarrested women demonstrators were "dispersed" by squads of police officers whose blocking and tackling was much more disciplined and effective than anything that the

Toronto Argos have ever put together. Stirring as these events were, however, they were less impressive than their consequences. Women had shown that they could shut down an anti-woman movie, which was important in the short term. In the long term, and much more significantly, a new feminist political force had arrived on the Toronto scene. WAVAW was born.

It wasn't an easy birth, but it was sustained, as birth always is, by a sense of profound female achievement and a limitless potential for the future. It was strong, as birth always is, because these women took an active, sometimes painful and quite frightening, part in it. This was for real, this street sisterhood. It crossed old factionalist barriers and brought many women into feminist politics for the first time. The group transcended old and troublesome barriers of class, ideology, and sexual orientation. The reason that it was able to do this was not some sudden mystical communion, nor inexplicable changes of heart. The reason was grounded in reality: these barriers could not exist because violence against women does not recognize these barriers either.

After birth, of course, comes nurture, planning, and responsibility. There were endless nightly meetings about strategy. The movie-house was picketed steadily for more than a week, with a rousing but peaceful turnout on the following Saturday. The police mounted guards on the cinema and kept a careful eye on the picketers. Some of these men quite clearly did not relish the task of appearing to Serve Sadism and Protect Porn: others appeared to enjoy it, and turned a blind eye when passing males voided their disapproval in gobs of beery spit, muttered oaths and indecent imprecations, and made unsubtle stabs at breasts and buttocks. After a couple of weeks, the management of the cinema was offering *Snuff* at half price, and a few days later it was withdrawn. In that interval, WAVAW had been busy.

It is difficult to assess whether the actions of WAVAW shortened the run of the movie, or whether, as some of the shrill media messiahs preached, all the publicity gave *Snuff* a box-office boost. This is now an academic question. It is more important to ask if that astonished young woman was right when she said that snuff-

ing out *Snuff* was an education. What did these women learn?

There is as yet no clear answer to that question, but it is possible to do some preliminary analysis. The sort of creative excitement and sense of political potential that the affair generated have not yet abated. Predictably, WAVAW was wooed by forces from the maverick left and from the established right. A few radicals, those who persist in seeing their motley bands as revolutionary vanguards, had some sort of notion of enlisting these women as rank-and-file troops in violent class struggle. There was some effort to persuade the group to mount some more violent confrontations, but this did not work. WAVAW was not beguiled into the violence route: the price in arrests, subsequent legal costs, and personal sacrifice was extravagant. No tragic heroines, no sacrificial lambs. Though this is not to say that there were not some pretty good shoves and kicks launched by outraged women.

Many of the women who took part in the action are socialists of one kind or another, but serious Marxist women are increasingly coming to doubt that women can rely on class struggle to liberate them from oppressive forms of male dominance which are so clearly pre-capitalist and supra-class. Such women are quite indifferent to sneers about "bourgeois feminism" and "neo-suffragism," for they recognize that autonomous feminism cannot grow directly out of unmodified male supremacist ideologies, even an ideology fathered by the superb intellect and compelling humanity of Karl Marx. Such women know that we must develop our own theory, our own practice, and the new political forms which can embody these. One of the most persistent features of feminist political organization has been a profound distrust of those hierarchies of power on which the male political imagination persistently petrifies. It doesn't seem to matter much whether "leadership" lies in the hands of self-appointed revolutionary vanguards, or in elected élites which protect the interests of corporate capitalism, or a straightforward fascist dictatorship. It seems to many women that men historically have been and are endlessly and dangerously infatuated with the notion of The Strong Man. Feminists generally reject dictatorial modes of or-



ceptibly, strategies are fiercely and lengthily debated, agendas stretch, sag, and change in mid-stream and snafus are not unknown. By masculine standards, all this is hopelessly inefficient, which no doubt satisfies those slaves of the stereotype of the giddy woman. Yet out of this cumbersomeness there is gradually growing a rich vein of practical experience, the exhilaration of getting things done without rigid chains of command, a new dimension to the notion of democracy, and, above all, a sense of creating new and vibrant social forms of working relations among women.

The battle against violence against women continues, but the experience gained in snuffing out *Snuff* was, in the widest sense, educational. Politically, the issue of violence against women has proven to be not only an urgent one, but a unifying one, as the action of the ideologically diverse women on City Council demonstrated. There are a lot of women who have not responded to the clarion calls of earlier feminists, which appeared to urge women to destroy the family, support abortion in all circumstances, help to organize trade unions for prostitutes, demand wages for housework, or abandon heterosexuality.

There has never been a widely based social forum in which crucial feminist questions could be debated without filtration through the distorting mirrors of the institutions of male supremacy, and many women clearly had difficulty in relating such versions of issues to their own experience. Violence against women is different. On the streets, in houses, in shopping centres, at work, in

Illustration by Christine Roche

ganization and the personalization of power, but they are not so naive as to suppose that after centuries of this kind of stuff clear alternatives will be self-evident. What they do understand is that such alternatives must be worked out from the standpoint of women, by women and for women.

From the start, WAVAW has not lent it-

self easily to conventional organizational or class analyses. It has no executive, no leader, no office bearers, no heroines—or perhaps only heroines. Each meeting is chaired by a different woman, and ad-hoc committees arise when they are needed and silently pass away when they are not. No one pretends that this makes life easy: decisions emerge slowly, almost imper-

hospitals and clinics, in courts of law, in every corner of our social space, violence and harassment is something that millions of women know in their bodies, in their minds, in their lived lives. The developing resistance to this situation is a potent force for solidarity among women. Working women, immigrant women, welfare women, native women, young women and old women, gay and straight and celibate women, women in factories and women in schools, black women and white women, city women and suburban women, rural women, little girls, wives, mothers, daughters, sisters: women *know* about violence against women. What we do not yet know is how to resist it, but we are learning, and we are learning together and learning fast.

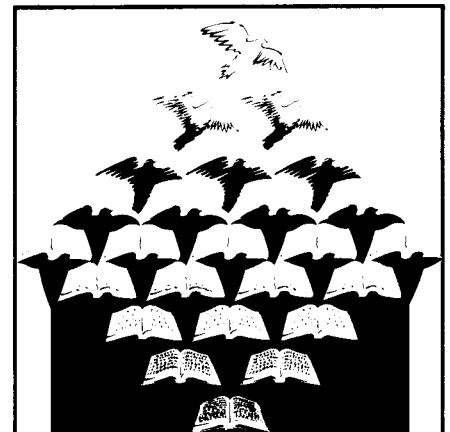
Clearly, strategies of resistance must cover a wide range of objectives and some of these will seem more urgent to some women than to others. We need to hammer out the specifics of necessary legal reforms and then work for them: we have to create new kinds of political organizations; we have to develop theoretical grounds for our activities: we must give support and practical aid to violated women. We have to study the relationship of violence against women to the economic basis of our society: we have to help women organize to resist not only economic exploitation, but endless sexual harassment and indignities on the job. Male supervisors, for example, cannot be permitted to sit and leer at closed-circuit pictures of women workers changing their clothes. We also need to tackle boldly the sacred bull of censorship, and say what we will not tolerate as "entertainment." We have to resist the trend to sado-masochistic and subliminally violent advertising: to redefine motherhood while keeping a wary eye on the geneticists; to strive to re-establish women's oldest profession of midwifery and take back childbirth as women's business. We need an organized and insistent campaign to enforce the allocation of resources — the monstrous profits from the pill, perhaps — to develop safe and effective contraception. There is plenty to do. The order of priority of these and other objectives can be worked out only by an autonomous women's movement, and they clearly reach beyond the issue of violence against women to questions of radical social transforma-

tion. This is a historical task of considerable magnitude, calling for a creative unity of thinking and doing.

And what of education? Our young friend of Yonge Street experienced street politics as education in the most transformative sense. She was not, however, expressing a conventional view of what education means, and parents and educators are not perhaps ready to include street politics among desirable educational experiences. As far as educational institutions are concerned, the liberal tenet that education represents a force for human liberation and equality of opportunity has become very frayed at the edges. Study after study has shown that educational systems reinforce existing class and gender stereotypes and foster a radically unequal distribution of life chances and choices. Educational institutions are generally a conservative rather than a liberating force in society, and educational bureaucracy has proven itself resistant to the goodwill and hard work of countless dedicated individual educators and concerned parents. It is not likely that educational structures as presently constituted can change society, but this does not mean that we simply undertake a quietist vigil until such time as a new society changes education. There are important transitional tasks that educators can undertake. In terms of violence against women, there are needs that women educators can tackle at once. While it is true that violence is systematically incorporated in our society, the experience of violence is nonetheless a very personal thing. The woman confronting the rapist hardly has time to meditate on her situation as the bitter fruit of centuries of male education in the right to dominate, or as a manifestation of the alienation from humanity that is integral to the capitalist mode of production. What she has to do in the first instance is to defend herself against her attacker, and in the second place protect herself from the laws that are designed to protect him. These things are practical and can be taught.

The inclusion of courses in self-defence for female students in school curricula is an urgent and practically attainable project. There should not be "extras" offered by concerned teachers, but credit courses designed to ensure that these young women know how to defend them-

selves physically and psychologically, and have well-grounded knowledge of the lawlessness of rape and rape laws. Schools can do something, too, in teaching young women that sexual harassment on the job can be expected but must not be tolerated. Whether the schools are yet ready to deal with the question of assault in the bosom of the family is a much more "delicate" and difficult question. But the self-defence question is urgent. For years, women have listened to the argument that it is better to be raped than to be badly hurt. Let us strive to present a more cogent argument to rapists: it is better not to rape than to get badly hurt. This can be done if girls are taught the arts of self-defence and given the confidence to use these skills at an early age. Educators can take the initiative in seeing that this happens. In this way, active resistance to violence against women can begin with a systematic erosion of the teaching of the inevitability of female passivity, and as such presents a challenge and an opportunity to women educators, to parents, and to female students.



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