

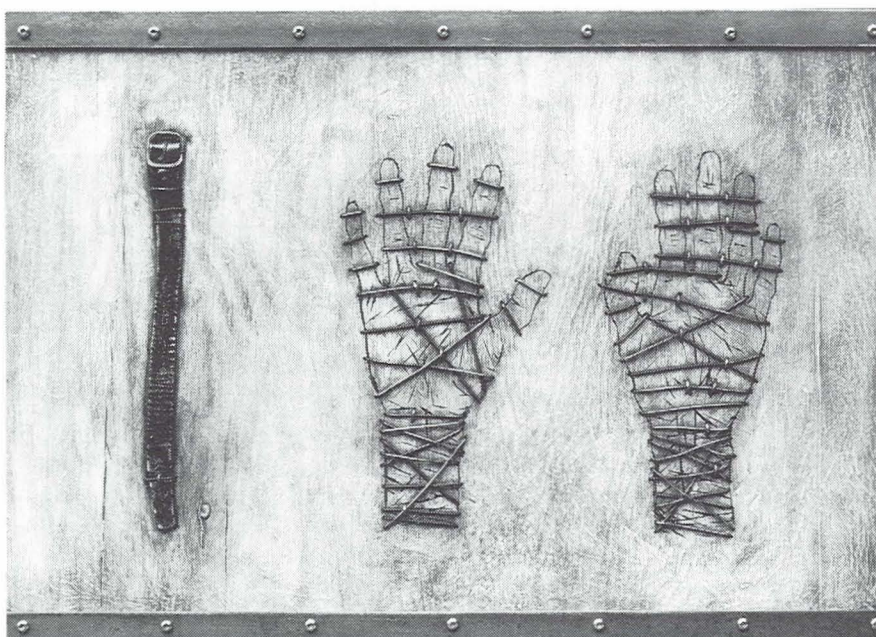
# Trading Abuse for Poverty

By Kim Fraser

*Le présent article examine le phénomène de la discrimination fondée sur le sexe qui est à l'origine de la pauvreté chez les femmes maltraitées. L'article souligne les conditions de vie très restrictives de la majorité des femmes qui décident de se sortir des situations où elles sont victimes de mauvais traitements.*

Abused women who come to shelters are almost always economically disadvantaged. This is not to suggest that women from other income groups are not abused; abuse in fact crosses all economic and cultural boundaries. However, abused women who are economically independent and who have financial means do not generally use shelters. While it is true that some of the women served by our shelter come from middle income homes, their income status is contingent on their

husband's earnings and in most cases they have no access to his money. Many of the women we see have limited job skills and limited education. Among the women who are employed we find that many hold low skilled jobs where they earn wages far below the average "unattached" Canadian woman's annual salary of \$19,854.<sup>1</sup> (Statistics Canada) A significant number of the women have been working in their homes without pay. Few have job skills that are current, and many are economically dependent on their partners. In addition to the trauma of emotional and physical abuse, most of these women are isolated socially. Some are prohibited from working and socializing with family and friends. They are purposefully isolated from the community so that their abusers can exert more control over them. As well, we see a significant number of women whose abusers have chosen (among other things) economic means of abusing them. For example, their abusers may refuse to provide them (and their children) with money, food, medical treatment,



Diana Thompson, *Punishment #1*. Steel, wire, belt, acrylic on plywood. 23.75" x 17"  
From "Out of the Drawer," a Women's Art Resource Centre exhibition.

and clothing on a regular basis.

Our 1991 shelter statistics showed that the women we serve tend to be young: 79 per cent are between the ages of 21 and 40, most (56 per cent) are accompanied by children who are typically (48 per cent) four years old or younger. We are encouraged by the fact that the women are young with young children because it demonstrates that with supports such as emergency shelters women are leaving abusive situations sooner. However, as a young population with young children, these women are in particular need of social and economic supports. They have many years of childrearing and work still ahead of them, and, potentially, many years of poverty too—if economic and social conditions are against them. Our 1991 statistics also showed that 59 per cent of the women remained separated at the time of discharge from the shelter. Clearly, the majority of women that we serve will go on to establish themselves and their children in the community. Once there, however, too many of them will experience incredible hardship. Some will experience poverty for the first time; others, already familiar with poverty, will see their economic situations worsen considerably.

This certain poverty need not be the case. With adequate supports such as fairly compensated employment, or, in the absence of employment, adequate welfare benefits, assisted housing, child support, and daycare, abused women could

experience a better quality of life. Providing these economic supports is part of an adequate community response to woman abuse. ("The National") However, instead of finding support when they leave violent situations, abused women find many obstacles. Among these is the lack of adequate child support payments.

In theory, adequate child support payments made by ex-spouses could go a long way to alleviate the financial burden that women face caring for their children alone. In practice, orders for child support payments have been ineffective measure because they are not adhered to. Statistics from 1989 showed that only 26 per cent of all support orders were being enforced, and at that time it was estimated that 90,000 children in Ontario were affected by non-payment of court-ordered support payments representing \$230,000 million in arrears. ("The National") Another appalling statistic showed that while the Attorney General's support enforcement programme was only able to collect 26 per cent of outstanding support payments, it employed 220 people at a cost of 13.9 million per year. ("The National")

Because there are many barriers to women's employment—among them poor wages and a lack of daycare—and because support payments are not reliable, many abused women must go on social assistance when they leave the shelter. By all accounts, social assistance benefits are insufficient to meeting even the most basic needs, i.e. food and shelter. In our experience, even women who live in rent-geared-to-income housing cannot stretch their benefits to cover food costs for an entire month. These women and their children would frequently go hungry if they did not have access to food banks. However, food banks are not an adequate response to poverty either. Despite the fact that they provide much needed immediate relief, food banks are part of a system that has institutionalized poverty. Their very existence allows our continued inaction on welfare reform. Without food banks, our communities would have to deal with the fact that many people on social assistance or in low paying jobs cannot adequately feed themselves. In any event, asking for hand-outs of food is a completely demoralizing experience for women forced to drag their children around with them to food banks.

Because there is such an enormous stigma to using food banks and because many of them limit their users to one visit per month, shelters have started to operate food banks for their ex-residents. Certainly, this function is not without its administrative costs and headaches and it is not one that emergency shelters were meant to fulfill. But shelter-run food banks make an enormous difference to women living on marginal incomes and for that reason we will continue to run them.

One economic support that does assist abused women is subsidized housing. The Metro Toronto Housing Authority (MTHA) has targeted abused women for special priority, which means that they are usually housed within three to four months of their initial application. From an economic standpoint, MTHA housing is beneficial to abused women; from a social standpoint it has less appeal. Because MTHA does not have an income mix amongst its tenants, the housing projects have become ghettos for the poor, with all of the attendant problems that go along with ghettos. There is a stigma attached to living in MTHA and many women are resistant to the idea of raising their children there. From a financial standpoint, however, few women have any viable alternatives. The other problem with MTHA housing is that some women do not qualify for it. Women without status, i.e. women who are without citizenship, landed immigrant or refugee status do not qualify for MTHA, and must find housing on the private market. These women report that they experience discrimination during their housing search because they are poor, single, have children, and, if they reveal that they are abused, because they are perceived as 'problem' women. Other women experience outright racism. They report that when they respond in person to an ad for an apartment, they are told that it has been rented. Further investigation reveals that the apartment is still available.

The obstacles that abused women face in their attempts to live free from violence are appalling—even more so given that it is our government's social policy to encourage women to leave when they are being abused. Beyond short term emergency assistance in the form of shelters and counselling services, there are few viable long term economic and social supports for abused women. This lack of

support sends many abused women back to violent partners (and keeps many more from ever leaving in the first place). The women view these 'reconciliations' as personal failure. We view them as the final outcome of a system that sets up abused women for failure from the very beginning. Barriers to women's full participation in the community reinforce the feeling that the community does not support their escape and in fact amount to a form of collusion with abusers who are confident their victims cannot leave them. ("The National")

Because abused women are poor, isolated, and struggling to survive, it is difficult for them to organize as a political entity to demand social justice. Even if they were empowered, it seems that short of a cultural revolution that would change the economic and social conditions of all women, abused women would have few means to bring about such social change. In the meantime, many will continue to experience incredible hardship. In essence, abused women have traded their experiences of abuse for poverty. Given the obstacles that they face, it is remarkable that so many women leave violent situations. This must be seen as a testament to both their desperation and their enormous strength.

*Kim Fraser has been an advocate for abused women since 1984. With a particular interest in political action, Kim has been a member of the Lobby Committee of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAIH) since 1987. In that capacity, Kim has had many opportunities to lobby politicians and government policymakers on woman abuse and shelter issues. She works at Emily Stowe Shelter for Women in Toronto.*

<sup>1</sup> For married women working full time in dual-earner families, the figure is \$22,661. Statistics Canada, *Characteristics of Dual-Earner Families*, 1989 (Catalogue 13-215).

## References

- Statistics Canada. *Income Distributions by Size in Canada, 1990* (Catalogue 13-207).  
Statistics from "The National." CBC Television, 1991.