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## FAMILY VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD

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In the short time I have today, I'd like to tell you about the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (CACSW), its work on male violence against women, and the reasons why the CACSW believes that gun control has an important part to play in the struggle to end violence against women. The CACSW was established by the federal government in Canada in 1973.<sup>1</sup> Our mandate is to advise the government and inform the public on issues important to the women of Canada. Since it was established, the CACSW has published more than 300 research projects on a wide variety of topics.

### I. WHY THE CACSW CALLS IT "MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN"<sup>2</sup>

In our joint role as advocates for women and as publisher, the CACSW is very sensitive to "naming"—that is, to "choosing"—the words that describe and explain the experiences that are the subject of our work. When the CACSW first raised the issue of violence occurring in women's homes at the hands of their male partners, we used the term "wife battering." Wife battering has not always been on the political agenda in Canada. When the issue was first raised in our House of Commons by Margaret Mitchell, a federal member of Parliament, her male colleagues laughed. Today, nobody is laughing. Our government has recognized this as a national issue, but, showing an uncharacteristic interest in gender-neutral language, it initially referred to these assaults as "domestic violence" or "family violence." We have protested the use of this terminology because it hides the victims. As early as 1980, the CACSW maintained that seventy-two percent of all family violence was estimated

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\* President of the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women; University of Alberta, B.Ed. 1974, M.Ed. 1976, Ph.D. 1985. She has previously served as Founder of the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada, President of the Congress of the Black Women of Canada, and a member of the Canadian delegation to "Forum '85" in Nairobi, Kenya.

\*\* Speaking Notes for Dr. Glenda Simms.

1. For more information about the history of the CACSW and the issues it examined in its first twenty years, see CANADIAN ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN, EXPANDING OUR HORIZONS: THE WORK OF THE CANADIAN ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN (1993) [hereinafter EXPANDING OUR HORIZONS].

2. This material is largely drawn from EXPANDING OUR HORIZONS. *Id.*

to be wife battering. Gender-neutral language also protects the perpetrators.

As a result, the CACSW has taken to naming the perpetrator as well as the victim and now uses the expression "male violence against women." Recently, the Canadian government began to come around. A Parliamentary committee studying the issue referred to "the War Against Women," and the Canadian government appointed a national panel on "Violence Against Women."

All of this is a very long way of saying that my remarks this morning will focus on male violence against women and that I choose these words with care.

## II. A STATISTICAL SNAPSHOT OF MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CANADA

Male violence against women is expressed in discouragingly familiar ways all over the world. However, I'd like to give you some Canadian statistics:

- The first attempt to estimate the extent of wife battering in Canada was undertaken by the CACSW in 1980, when we reported that one in ten Canadian women was battered by her partner.<sup>3</sup>
- In the late 1970s, there were 71 transition houses in operation throughout the country.<sup>4</sup> By 1992, there were 248 shelters<sup>5</sup> and a reported 78,429 admissions.<sup>6</sup>

By the 1990s, male violence against women had sufficient public awareness to encourage Statistics Canada, our national statistical agency, to conduct a national survey on the topic.<sup>7</sup> In 1993, Statistics Canada

3. LINDA MACLEOD, *WIFE BATTERING IN CANADA: THE VICIOUS CIRCLE* 48 (1980).

4. *Id.*

5. National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, *Transition Houses and Shelters for Battered Women in Canada* (Ottawa: Health and Welfare Canada, 1992). If second-stage housing and other facilities that on occasion accept battered women are included, the figure reaches 319. All figures reported in *EXPANDING OUR HORIZONS*, *supra* note 1, at 69 n. 36.

6. *Profile of Transition Homes/Shelters for Victims of Family Violence*, *THE DAILY*, Nov. 9, 1993 (Statistics Canada, Ottawa), at 4.

7. *The Violence Against Women Survey*, *THE DAILY*, (Statistics Canada, Ottawa). See also *STATISTICS CANADA/CANADIAN CENTRE FOR JUSTICE STATISTICS, FAMILY VIOLENCE IN CANADA*

interviewed 12,300 women over the age of eighteen in depth by telephone about their experiences of physical and sexual violence since the age of sixteen. This is the first national survey of its kind anywhere in the world. Its results are statistically representative of all Canadian women, and can be generalized to the female population at large. Here are some of the findings of this survey:

- Over half (51%) of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of sixteen.<sup>8</sup>
- Forty-five percent (45%) of all Canadian women have experienced violence by men known to them—dates, boyfriends, marital partners, friends, family, neighbours, etc.<sup>9</sup>
- Almost one-third (29%) of all women who have ever been married or lived common-law have experienced physical or sexual violence by their partner.<sup>10</sup> Almost two-thirds (63%) of them have been assaulted more than once, and almost a third (32%) of them more than ten times.<sup>11</sup>
- Over a third (34%) of battered women feared for their lives; 45% feared for their lives in past relationships.<sup>12</sup> *A shocking 13%—roughly one in seven—of women in a current relationship felt their lives were in danger from their partners.*<sup>13</sup>

This study also demonstrated that violence is intergenerational: Women who reported having a violent father-in-law were three times as likely to be assaulted by their partners as women with non-violent fathers-in-law.<sup>14</sup> In summary, male violence against women is a part of our ordinary, every day lives and, mostly, it comes at the hands of men we know.

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(1994).

8. *The Violence Against Women Survey, id.* at 1.

9. *Id.* at 2.

10. *Id.* at 4.

11. *Id.* at 5.

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

### III. MALE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN INVOLVING THE USE OF WEAPONS

The Statistics Canada national survey on violence against women also reported on the use of weapons:

- Six percent (6%) of violent incidents by men *other than spouses* involved a weapon or something that was used as a weapon.<sup>15</sup> One percent (1%) involved guns.<sup>16</sup>
- However, weapons were used by 44% percent of violent spouses.<sup>17</sup> Sixteen percent (16%) of married women had a gun or knife used against them by their partner.<sup>18</sup>

These figures support earlier research by the Canadian Department of Justice on domestic homicides involving guns. In that study,<sup>19</sup> undertaken in 1992, researchers investigated ninety-three (of a total 102) incidents of domestic homicide involving firearms that took place in Canada in 1989 and 1990. Among their findings:

- Husbands shot and killed their wives in about half (46%) of these cases.<sup>20</sup>
- In another 5%, husbands killed their wives and another adult (2.4%), or their wives and one or more children (2.4%).<sup>21</sup>
- Where husbands killed wives, in 70% of cases, they also killed themselves or attempted suicide.<sup>22</sup>

Several weeks ago, I was in Sudbury, a small city in northern Ontario. One of the topics I was speaking about was gun control. And

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15. *Id.* at 6.

16. *Id.* at 5.

17. *Id.* at 6.

18. *Id.*

19. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, CANADA, DOMESTIC HOMICIDES INVOLVING THE USE OF FIREARMS, (Mar. 1992) [hereinafter DOMESTIC HOMICIDES].

20. *Id.* at 34.

21. *Id.* at 23.

22. *Id.* at 35.

on that day in Sudbury, a twenty-one year old young man shot his partner and then killed himself. When I returned to Ottawa, I had a call from the brother of the young woman who had been murdered. He said, "Can you do something about violence against women? What more could we have done to prevent this tragedy?" And one of the things I asked him was, "Did you see any signs? Did your sister ever say anything to you that you overlooked?" And he thought about it and said, "You know, maybe there were little things that I didn't pay attention to." Unfortunately, he paid attention when it was too late.

And there are signs. It's just that in most cases, they are part of the everyday events around us, and as a result, we become desensitized to them. In Canada, over the course of a year, one in 300,000 wives will be shot to death by her husband.<sup>23</sup> Typically, the violence in these fatal relationships is not isolated. The Department of Justice study showed that, where husbands killed their wives with guns:

- There was previous violence in over eighty percent of these murders.<sup>24</sup>
- Family members or friends were aware of the violence in these relationships in seventy three percent of cases.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the Statistics Canada survey reported that women who experience male violence mostly turn to friends and neighbours (51%) and family (42%) for support.<sup>26</sup>
- Separation or divorce proceedings were under way in half of these cases.<sup>27</sup>
- One in four women shot to death by her husband told someone she feared he would use a gun.<sup>28</sup>

The gun lobby argues that law enforcement efforts should focus on the criminals and not on "legitimate" gun owners. But the Department of

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23. *Id.* at 45.

24. *Id.* at 37.

25. *Id.*

26. *The Violence Against Women Survey*, *supra* note 7, at 8.

27. DOMESTIC HOMICIDES, *supra* note 19, at 37.

28. *Id.* Fear of gun expressed (not to police)—15%; fear of gun expressed (to police)—11%. *Id.*

Justice study reports that in only eighteen percent<sup>29</sup> of cases was there illegal possession of a firearm.<sup>30</sup>

The CACSW's own research shows that between 1980 and 1989, 72 % of all women murdered with guns were shot by rifles and shotguns; this rate is much higher than the overall proportion of firearms homicides committed with rifles and shotguns (60%).<sup>31</sup> Rifles and shotguns are typically considered as hunting weapons and are unrestricted in Canada.

Male violence in the home is not a private problem. It's a public danger, and guns are a part of that danger.

#### IV. WHAT WOMEN BRING TO THE GUN CONTROL DEBATE

Male violence against women is a function of complex, interrelated factors. Gun control is not the whole solution to this violence, but the CACSW believes it can play an important role in preventing avoidable deaths. And because women's experience of violence is different from men's, we have a different perspective on gun control.

Women are at greatest risk in their homes and at the hands of men they know. Legally-owned, easily-accessible rifles and shotguns are a particular concern for women. Consequently, controlling access to firearms by "legitimate" users of guns is an important part of what women bring to public policy on gun control.

Guns play a frequent and fatal role in male violence against women. But we must keep in mind that women are also the grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, colleagues, and friends of shooting victims:

- Every year, more than 1,000 people in Canada are hospitalized with gunshot wounds; about half of these are the result of an accident.<sup>32</sup>
- Studies in several Canadian provinces demonstrate that most accidental shootings take place in the home and involve children.<sup>33</sup> Between 1970 and 1990, 424

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29. *Id.*

30. *Id.*

31. CANADIAN ADVISORY COUNCIL ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN, CEASE-FIRE: A BRIEF TO THE LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE STUDYING BILL C-17 ON GUN CONTROL, Publication No. 91-L-1774 (1991) [hereinafter CEASE-FIRE].

32. STATISTICS CANADA, HOSPITAL MORBIDITY SURVEY, 1981/82 - 1990/91 (unpublished report), taken from *Presentation to the Liberal Rural Caucus, Background Paper*, Coalition for Gun Control, June 13, 1994, app. 8 (unpublished).

33. Heidi Rathjen, *Revue de Littérature: Statistiques et Études sur la Violence*

children under the age of fourteen were shot to death accidentally, while another 162 committed suicide with guns.<sup>34</sup>

- Almost one in three (30%) suicides in Canada are committed with guns.<sup>35</sup> Males tend to use guns more than females do and are six (6) times more likely to die than females who attempt suicide.<sup>36</sup>

#### V. CANADA AND THE U.S. COMPARED: A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

So far, I've presented a statistical and anecdotal snapshot of male violence against women in Canada and the role of guns in that violence. Certainly the magnitude of numbers, and some of the details, may differ when comparing Canada and the United States, but there is a great deal that both countries share. And I have a picture that illustrates the commonality between our countries.

This summer, I received a telephone call from a distraught father. His adolescent son had purchased a T-shirt which depicted two figures using the male and female symbols which we frequently see displayed in public facilities as safety symbols. On this T-shirt, the male figure is holding a gun to the head of the female figure. The heading reads: "bitch". So, why do I use this as an example of shared experience? Because this T-shirt comes from and represents aspects of American culture—a culture which has enormous influence on and consequences for Canadian society. We found out about this T-shirt from *Ms.* magazine. From time to time, *Ms.* runs a feature called "No Comment," in which it reproduces advertisements that are so sexist they need no comment. The April 1994 issue of *Ms.* featured an advertisement from *Big Brother* magazine which displays this same logo. As it turns out, this image is used to sell skateboards made in California! Kids are encouraged to "Send a dollar for stickers and info."<sup>37</sup>

Guns are used in Canada, as they are in the United States, for subsistence, sporting, and recreational activities. But there is evidence that

*Familiale et le Suicide Relatives aux Armes à Feu*, at 8 (Montréal: Coalition pour le contrôle des armes, 1994).

34. *Id.* at 3.

35. *Id.* at 7.

36. CEASE-FIRE, *supra* note 31, at 5.

37. *No Comment*, *Ms.*, Apr. 1994, at 98 (back cover).



our attachment to guns goes beyond their utility; its roots can be found in male culture. In fact, the notion that guns are an expression of male power goes back to our colonial roots. Male power in the so-called Wild West was associated with shooting skill. Today, the use of guns and violence in the media has contributed to perceptions that guns are used by heroes to resolve conflicts. Effective police officers in North American movies and television programs are most often those who shoot the most "bad guys." As aboriginal people and members of minority communities can attest, this glorification of weaponry has also served and continues to serve as a metaphor for most deeply-rooted racist aggressions in our society.<sup>38</sup>

It is very important that we look at the whole relationship of race and gender as well. Black women and aboriginal women in Canada are saying that they will accommodate the violence in their lives rather than turn their sons and husbands over to the police, because far too many of their loved ones have been shot by the police. Racism is a key issue in gun control in Canada and, I think, it must be a key issue in the United States as well.

To wrap up quickly, let me say that we must not allow gender to disappear. The gun lobby—spearheaded by the National Rifle Association and, in Canada, the National Firearms Association—has undertaken a very powerful campaign which both builds on women's fears of public violence and pitches to women the very values of aggression and domination which underpin our culture of violence. The gun lobby in both countries is telling women to shed their "victimization" like so much old clothing by arming themselves. They are literally cashing in on a current debate within feminism about how to achieve equality—a view mischaracterized as being "for" or "against" victims.

I reject the view that we have been bogged down by "victim feminism." To my mind, this way of seeing feminist differences—and we do have them—individualizes what is a systemic problem. And the solutions, too, must be systemic. Arming individual women is the wrong solution to the wrong problem. Most importantly, for me, this tactic fails to acknowledge that the project to end male violence against women is—and must be—a whole social project. It must involve women and men and children, as well as the institutions which recreate our society from generation to generation.

I'd like to leave you with one challenge. The U.S. Surgeon General has identified gun violence as "one of the leading public health issues in America." According to one analysis, this presents guns like any other

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38. This argument is developed in more detail in *CEASE-FIRE*, *supra* note 31, at 6-9.

product that potentially threatens public health, for example, tobacco and food additives. As we prepare for another round of debate in Canada, this "take" on gun control may be used increasingly as well. So far in Canada, it's been the message primarily from emergency room physicians, who have to deal with the consequences of accidents and attempted suicides. And I want to stress that they have been valuable allies in the struggle to end gun violence.

There certainly are some advantages to characterizing the issue as a public health danger. It changes the focus from the means of violence to its potential effects, thus neatly undercutting the gun lobby's message that it's the criminals, not the guns, that are the problem. It may also build social consensus by appealing to the notion that guns hurt everybody, especially our children who die because access to a gun resulted in their accidental death or suicide.

However, I think it is important for women to continue to bring their own perspective to this debate. We must not allow gender to disappear. We must insist that the link be understood between male violence against women and the underlying values that influence our cultural attachment to guns.

