



FAMILY VIOLENCE in a **PATRIARCHAL CULTURE**

A Challenge to Our Way of Living

*“And I will raise them up on eagles’ wings
bear them on the breath of dawn
make them to shine like the sun
and hold them in the palm
of My hand.”*

Adapted from Psalm 91

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Family Violence in a Patriarchal Culture: A Challenge to our Way of Living

Every day we hear reports of wives being beaten, of children being assaulted, sexually abused and abducted. We know that families are breaking up at an unprecedented rate. Yet our need for trust, stability and permanence remains; people continue to form new relationships, to return to old ones, to bear children, to pin fresh hopes to broken dreams.

The problem of family violence is more than a simple matter of a few scattered individuals who need new techniques for anger control and sex therapy. It is embedded in a culture which, we now know for a fact, has tolerated incest, child abuse and wife battering for years and years.

And it is more than "*a women's issue*". For family violence is rooted in a social environment that affects us all. Could it continue for long were it not nourished by a host of values, beliefs and economic interests which we all reinforce and whose benefits we covet? Yet, all of us are its victims: women, men, the young, the old.

Is there a web of institutions, including religious ones, that keeps the violence going? Are there patterns of adaptations and alliances that keep both men and women enmeshed? This kit is an invitation for us to examine our own experience and explore cultural interconnections. It calls us to face the pain honestly, to expose self-deception, to refuse to permit one another to ignore and deny the problems, personally or publicly.

The purpose of this kit is to give expression to the hurt in Canadian families, to seek ways to make that hurt more speakable, to open us to deeper understandings of the roots and causes of violence, to help each of us attend to the pain in our communities and to begin a process of healing.

When you read recurring headlines of domestic or child abuse, do you ever wonder about the culture we live in?

Have you yourself ever been a victim of physical or sexual abuse? Do you know someone who is caught in the web of family violence right now?

Violence within the family is a widespread and serious problem in Canada. Evidence confirms that our society has tolerated incest, child abuse, wife battering and other forms of family violence for years. Yet it remains our secret shame. It is so painful that we do not even talk about it – let alone understand it.

This kit is a beginning. It asks – Why family violence? It invites the reader through stories and commentary to explore the personal, cultural and spiritual dimensions of family violence. It seeks to help us begin to speak the unspeakable and to understand that which is almost beyond comprehension.

This kit also calls us to action. By means of user boxes outlining study questions and activities, audiovisuals and worship resources, we are urged to reach out in our communities and in our churches to help each other face the problem and find healing.

It is only within the last 100 years that wife assault has been considered illegal. Prior to that time, laws regulated the extent to which men could physically discipline their wives. One example is the popular "Rule of Thumb" termed by the English codifier of common law, William M. Blackstone, in 1767. This law permitted husbands to enforce domestic discipline in their homes as long as they used a switch or stick no broader than the width of their thumb. It was applied not only to wives but also to children and apprentices. All members of his household were seen as his property to do with as he saw fit if within reason. In Canada, it wasn't until 1968 with the Federal Divorce Act that cruelty became grounds for divorce. A woman, prior to 1968, would have to have visible proof of severe physical/mental abuse endangering her life before she could claim for alimony. In the words of one Ontario Chief Justice:

a husband may subject his wife, daily and even hourly to such treatment as makes her life a veritable hell on earth and she is without remedy if she is robust enough to suffer it all without impairment of her physical health or her mentality.

Deborah Sinclair (1985)