

## CLC STATEMENT DECEMBER 6, 1992: A NATIONAL DAY OF REMEMBRANCE AND ACTION ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

It is hard to believe that the massacre of fourteen women at the École Polytechnique in Montréal happened almost three years ago. Since the news of the outrage reached us, in televised images we cannot get out of our minds--the bodies being removed by ambulance, snow drifting down, the shock and the horror in people's faces--it is simply impossible to put it into the past, to make it history and place it safely out of reach.

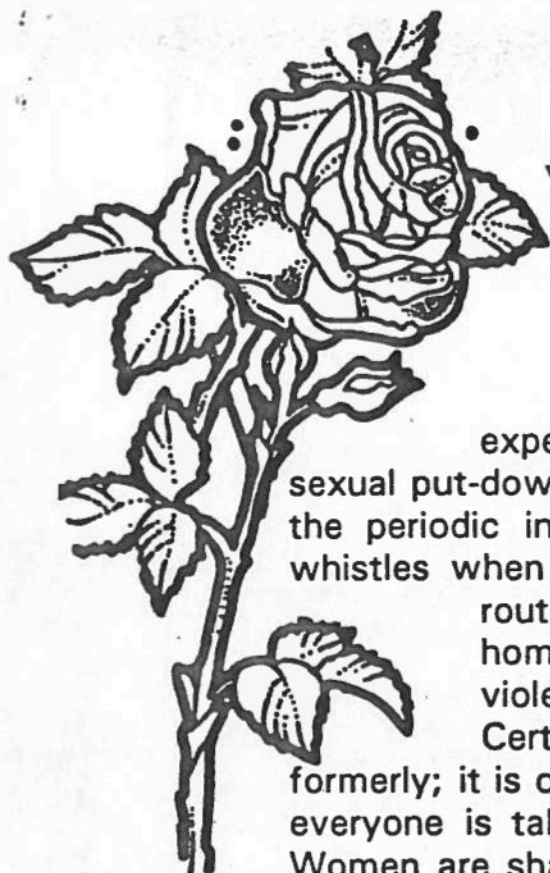
And this is not only because of the stark brutality of the event. Violence against women is constantly in the present. Women know--know from experience--that Marc Lépine's spasm of violent hatred was not an isolated act of madness, but one extreme of a spectrum of violence which is a living, everyday reality in our society.

The statistics are there for all to see. In Canada, one woman in eight is battered by her male partner. One woman in four is sexually assaulted, half of them before the age of 19. A sexual assault takes place every seventeen minutes. A woman who calls the police has likely been assaulted thirty times before doing so. 119 women were murdered in Canada by current or former husbands or partners in 1989, the year of the Montréal massacre.



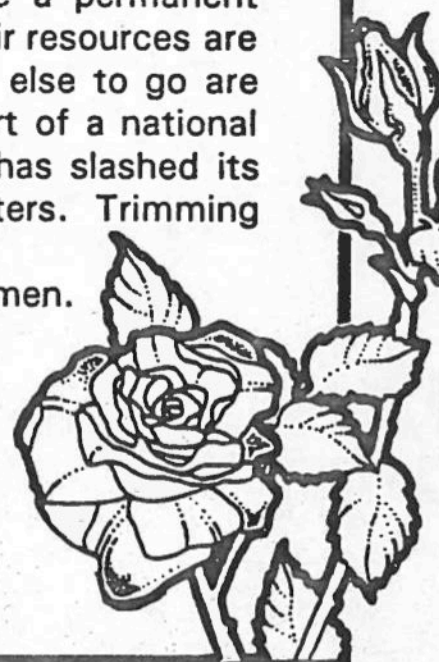
WOMEN'S BUREAU

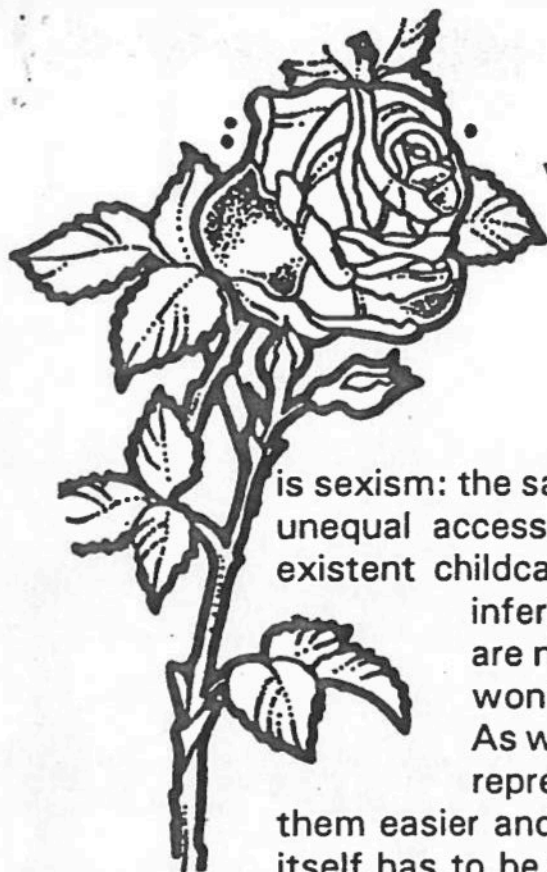




What is the reality behind these cold numbers? Women continue to endure a climate of violence which even the most sympathetic man cannot fully comprehend, because it is so far removed from his own experience. Whether it is the steady stream of sexual put-downs at the office from a co-worker or boss, or the periodic invasion of privacy by comment, gesture or whistles when she walks down the street; whether it is a routine beating at home, or sexual abuse in the home as a child, such emotional and physical violence is specifically directed against women. Certainly this issue is receiving more attention than formerly; it is on the national agenda, if precariously so, and everyone is talking about it. The silence is being broken. Women are sharing their experiences with the rest of us in increasing numbers, attempting to chronicle in mere words lives of unspeakable pain and brutality. MPs don't joke openly about wife assault any more. Police no longer refuse to answer "domestic disturbance" calls as a matter of policy. Men have organized a "White Ribbon" campaign. Sexual harassment is a priority union issue. But is the violence stopping as we put it under the national microscope?

Sadly, not yet. Women's shelters are a permanent feature of the landscape, like food banks. Their resources are stretched to the limit; women with nowhere else to go are having to be turned away. It is nothing short of a national disgrace, in fact, that the Tory government has slashed its already-limited financial support to these shelters. Trimming the deficit, it would seem, is more important than the lives and well-being of Canadian women. We have heard words and more words from Mary Collins, the Minister Responsible for the Status of Women; we now even have a Blue Ribbon Panel on the subject. And the violence goes on.

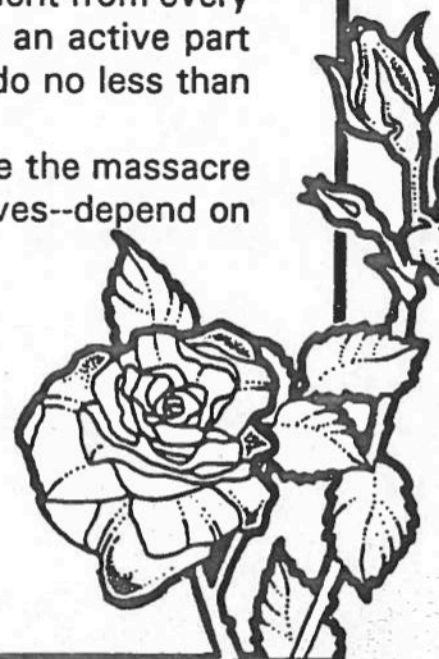




We in the labour movement know that problems get solved by learning, then by organizing, and then by acting together. We know--thanks largely to our sisters--that violence against women is a commonplace, that it happens all the time, and that its cause is sexism: the same sickness that perpetuates pay inequity, or unequal access to jobs, promotions and education, or non-existent childcare, or stereotypes and images of women as inferior and passive. We know that we ourselves are not free of sexism in the labour movement, and won't be until we are rid of it in society as a whole. As we know--we have learned--that a culture which represents any group of people as inferior makes them easier and more acceptable victims, so that the culture itself has to be fundamentally changed if the oppression and violence is to be stopped.

And so we are challenged to organize and work for change once again. We have passed an impressive-sounding Action Plan at the last Canadian Labour Congress Convention. It is an ambitious program, including various forms of political action, education, community work and workplace action to end violence against women. But if it is to be successful, if it is to work, it will require an ongoing commitment from every rank and file member and every leader to play an active part in a long-term national campaign which must do no less than transform society--and ourselves.

It can be done. It **must** be done. Because the massacre has taught us one ugly truth: lives--women's lives--depend on it.



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