

Topshee Conference

Theme of the 10th annual Topshee Memorial Conference at St. F.X. University on the weekend of June 11-13 was Violence Against Women. A record attendance of some 300 participants from all parts of the Maritimes and beyond may be attributed to the crisis nature of the "war against women."

According to keynote speaker Jan Heney, a social worker at the Kingston Penitentiary for Women, the numbers of women murdered in Canada have risen from 89 in 1989 to 187 in 1990 and 270 in 1991. If the trend continues, roughly 450 women could be murdered in this country this year. Heney said a woman is sexually assaulted somewhere in Canada every six minutes and is forced into sexual intercourse every 17 minutes. One participant noted, "Some 370 women will have been sexually assaulted and 130 raped, somewhere in Canada during the course of this conference" (Friday to Sunday).

There is indeed a war against women in progress and it derives from brute strength, a thirst for power, and rage at any perceived threat to that power — as a campaign for women's rights and equality.

In a reference to "economic abuse" of women, Ms. Heney noted that in 1921, women earned 61 percent of what men earned. Seventy years later, they earned 65 percent of what men earn. Commentators note that, at this rate, pay equity will not be achieved until the late 27th or early 28th century.

Ms. Heney dwelt upon denial — as refusal of family members to believe a child's story of abuse (incest), a wife's reluctance to come forward, either through fear of reprisal or to protect the "good name" of the family. These and other forms of denial, she said "serve to keep the family as it stands intact, with the probability of the same intactness in the future." Thus, with denial, it happens over and over again.

Comments from the workshops (Saturday morning) and the panel discussion (Saturday afternoon) include:

- Urgent need to break the silence.

- Violence against women has persisted through the millennia. Only in this generation has it come forward, through the efforts of women.

- The cycle is perpetuated through a reluctant judicial system — blaming the victim or questioning her credibility.

- Pornography contributes greatly to the abuse.

- The media promote pornography on the "freedom of speech" excuse.

- The media give low priority to women and child abuse. Some comments: "Where are the media today? Why is this all-important cause given such scant coverage?"

- Society is built upon hierarchy and patriarchy. Both deny basic human rights of half the population.

There were suggestions that the theme of next year's Topshee Conference be The Media in an effort to discover the cause of the apparent indifference to this mortal wound in the body of society.

- Sexual harassment is not an indication of affection or romance. It is a form of abuse stemming from male domination, a form of hatred.

All sessions ended with declarations that words (and tears) are not enough. Male participants at the conference pledged their support toward attaining hope, healing, and assurance of a better world.

This may well be the most important conference in the ten-year history of the Topshee series. We endorse the opinion of some participants that the same theme — ***'Love' Two — be next year's topic.***