



herStory of Woman Abuse and PEI Justice System

Executive Summary

In 1999, 21 Island women who had experienced violence in an intimate relationship agreed to participate in a research project focused on hearing their stories and gaining a better understanding of the impact of justice system responses on women leaving abusive relationships. Since then, their interviews have been transcribed and analysed and have resulted in this report. As well, a literature review was conducted which focused on woman abuse with a particular focus on Prince Edward Island research and studies. This is included in this report as well.

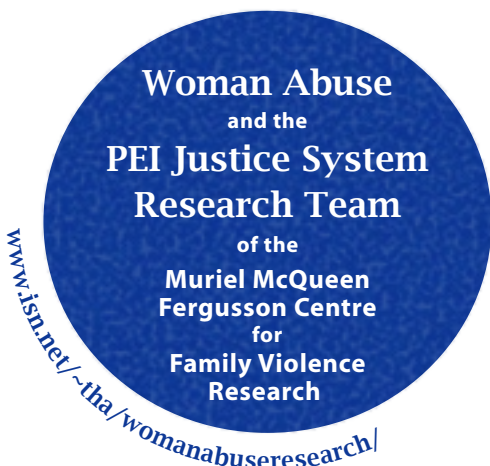
Research Analysis

This report summarizes the findings from interviews with 21 PEI women who experienced abuse at the hands of their partners. The interviews, which were conducted during 1999, provide information on incidents of woman abuse and system response over a 10-year period: 1989 through 1999.

Three-quarters of the women interviewed for this study were between the ages of 25 and 45. Nineteen women had been married to the abuser, one woman had lived common-law, and one had never lived with the abuser. The average length of time the women had stayed in the relationship was 15 years. In total the women had 53 children, most of whom were under age 18 when the abusive relationships ended.

The women described the abusers as controlling and manipulative. They agreed that the abusers seldom took responsibility for their actions and often blamed the victims for the abuse. The women also agreed that the abusers were skillful at manipulating the justice system to their advantage, especially police officers and judges.

Project participants reported being subjected to a wide range of abusive behaviour, including emotional, physical, sexual, threats, stalking, neglect, damage to property, violence toward children and pets, and suicide threats. A third of the women said that alcohol was a factor in the abuse. Several victims said the abusers continued to stalk, threaten, and abuse them after the relationship ended.



The women described how they were affected by being in the abusive relationship. They said they felt fearful and depressed, were unable to function, and had low self-esteem. And after the relationship ended, they said the effects of the trauma lingered in the form of flashbacks and recurring nightmares. The women also described how their children had been affected by the violence. They said the children displayed anger and aggressive behaviour, had sleeping difficulties and difficulties with school, and had increased illnesses.

The women interviewed identified a number of barriers that made it difficult for them to leave or end the abusive relationship. The barriers included fear of retribution, failure to recognize the abuse, lack of knowledge about or access to services and support, reluctance to give up on the relationship, pressure from family or clergy, a feeling of powerlessness, lack of confidence in the legal system, financial insecurity, and concern for the children.

What prompted many of the women to end the abusive relationship was fear for themselves and their children. For others, it was an expression of sympathy or support from a counselor or relative. Most women agreed that they would not have been able to end the abusive relationship without help.

All of the women interviewed for this study reported financial hardship after the relationship ended. In some cases the women had no income or financial support and had to apply for financial assistance. In other cases the women sought maintenance, child support or a settlement from the abuser, which often exacerbated their financial plight due to the added burden of lawyer's fees and court costs. Several women said they decided not to seek a settlement or support payments because they could not afford legal fees.

The women were asked to evaluate the legal and social services they had accessed. While there were many stories of effective and supportive services received in most aspects of the services discussed, many women stated that the legal and social system generally supported the abusers and re-victimized the victims. The women interviewed for this study also suggested a number of improvements to system response in cases of woman abuse, most frequently in the areas of coordinated services for victims and their children, improved enforcement of orders, consistent police response, financial assistance for victims, improved access to legal aid and family law lawyers and public education on woman abuse and family violence.

This research is representative of PEI women who have experienced violence in a relationship. The value of the research is in hearing the powerful stories that women told and gaining some perspective into their experiences with the justice system. The study provides baseline information on woman abuse and system response over a 10-year period: 1989 through 1999. A number of themes emerged from the women's stories, which are as follows:

- ➡ □ Although no clear picture of a typical victim resulted from the interviews in this study, the abusers were consistently described by the women as controlling, manipulative, and refusing to take responsibility for their actions.

- □ The women described a range of abusive behaviour, which systematically undermined their self-esteem and self-confidence. When the women finally ended the relationship, the effects of the abuse lingered. The women perceived that their children were also negatively impacted by the violence in the home.
- □ Although there were numerous barriers to ending the abusive relationship, the women said that what prompted them to finally leave was often fear for their safety and the safety of their children.
- □ Most women agreed that they would not have been able to leave without help. The interventions that women reported to be consistently helpful were from Transition House Association, Victim Services, physicians, counselors, Rape and Sexual Assault Crisis Centre, Community Legal Information Association, Lawyer Referral Service and Women's Network. The interventions that received mixed evaluations or which were consistently less helpful included those from police, Child Protection Services, the clergy, court, lawyers, financial assistance, legal aid and the Maintenance Enforcement Program.
- □ The women whose cases involved charges found them very effective in stopping further abuse.
- □ Many women indicated that stay away orders were not effective because they were seldom enforced.
- □ The women suggested a number of improvements to system response in cases of woman abuse. With respect to the legal system in general, the most frequent suggestions were for improved access to legal aid and family law lawyers, enforcement of stay away and support orders, a more consistent police response, financial support for victims of family violence, additional support groups and affordable counseling for victims and children and public education on woman abuse and family violence.

Woman abuse and the justice system: A literature review

The literature review indicates some correlation between the experiences of PEI women with those of women elsewhere. For instance, both the current study and other research indicate that women who have experienced violence and abuse in their relationships often continue to be fearful about their safety even after they leave an abusive environment (DeMaris & Swinford, 1996). As well, the findings of this research are consistent with other research in indicating that incidents of family violence were likely to escalate over time (Fitzgerald, 1999).

The impact of domestic violence on victims, and the fact that many Island women live in rural isolation, creates a population with special needs in terms of justice system access. The review of PEI-based research conducted within the past two decades indicates that Island women leaving abusive relationships have many needs which are not being met by the present justice system.

The recommendations of the investigations-regardless of the time period in which the projects were conducted, or of the purposes for which the studies were conducted-are remarkably similar. For example, advocates for woman abuse victims have been suggesting for years that victims receive financial aid for legal services (Reddin, 1987; McQuaid, 1991; Bradford, 1998; Nicholson, 2000; Bradford, 2001). With some exceptions, such as the creation of Victim Services, other recommendations have been made over and over again in Prince Edward Island with little impact.

Additional Materials

A series of one and two page fact sheets have been created which connect existing research and information about woman abuse with the stories of PEI women who participated in this project. The topics include;

- »»» Forms of Woman Abuse
- »»» Emotional or Psychological Abuse
- »»» Economic Abuse
- »»» Sexual Abuse
- »»» Physical Abuse
- »»» Isolation
- »»» The Link Between Abuse of Animals and Family Violence
- »»» Profile of An Abuser
- »»» How Abusers Use Children to Control Their Partner
- »»» Substance Abuse and Family Violence
- »»» Family Violence and Pregnancy
- »»» Continuation of the Cycle of Violence
- »»» Impact of Exposure to Woman Abuse on Children
- »»» Why Doesn't She Just Leave?
- »»» How Can You Help a Woman in an Abusive Relationship?
- »»» Survivors' Suggestions for Improving System Response

Some fact sheets include research and statistics from other sources illustrated by the stories of PEI women and others summarize themes or helpful information that came out of our interviews with women. The fact sheets are available in English and French on the project website at <http://www.isn.net/~tha/womanabuseresearch>.

This Executive Summary is also available in both languages on the project website. The full report, including a literature review, is available in English only on the project website.