

A User's Guide for the film series

A series of three films examining the urgent need for services to battered women.

Produced by Studio D, National Film Board of Canada



National Film Board of Canada Office national du film du Canada

Introduction

Wife battering is a sad fact of life for many Canadian families. A study done in 1972 indicated that one in ten Canadian women are battered by their partners each year. A more recent study places the figure at one in six. Battering crosses all socio-economic lines, affects all age groups, and occurs in small farming communities as well as in big cities.

In recent years, the veil of silence over this widespread social problem has been lifted. But although wife battering is now recognized as a crime in Canada, services that provide assistance to battered women remain far less than adequate. Almost half the women who leave violent relationships return to their mate at least once, often because they are frustrated by a system which is confusing, cumbersome and inefficient.

The films in **The Next Step** series were made to demonstrate the very real needs of battered women and their children in every part of the country, and to encourage communities, policy makers, and funding agencies to collaborate in providing the services that are desperately needed to meet those needs.

About the Films

The Next Step is a series of three films that examine what happens to battered women once they decide to leave their violent partners. The films explore the various services a woman will need as she attempts to rebuild her life. Because those needs vary greatly depending on a woman's geographic location, the films explore different kinds of programs and services available in urban, rural, northern and native settings.

In addition to relating the experiences of several women who have left violent relationships, the films introduce people who work actively to provide support and services to battered women in their communities. These people talk frankly about the kinds of programs that are needed and about strategies to establish those services.

Sylvie's Story

When Sylvie's husband left for work that last morning, she knew she could not take another beating—she had to get out to save her life. Her husband had taken the phones from the house. Sylvie dressed her 3-year-old son, walked to a phone booth and called the police. She was taken to the Auberge Transition, a shelter for battered women and their children in downtown Montreal.

Since its inception in 1975, the Auberge has provided emergency shelter for thousands of women who have decided to leave their violent partners. The film follows Sylvie's experience once she enters the transition house.

Staff members advise Sylvie and help her make choices as she starts to piece her life together. How will she support herself? What are her legal rights? How will she find employment, housing, daycare? In addition to the advice and support of the staff, she receives the encouragement of other women in the house who talk frankly about their experiences.

In making decisions, Sylvie realizes the most important aspect of her stay at the transition house is that it has enabled her to start the long process of regaining her sense of self-worth after years of being physically and emotionally assaulted.

A Safe Distance

Battered women can be found everywhere in this country — on isolated farms, in northern industrial towns, in rural communities, and on reserves. When these women decide to leave their violent partners, they often face a lack of services, or services that are too far away to be readily accessible. Escaping to a safe place may depend on having the bus or taxi fare — something many battered women in rural areas do not have — to get to the nearest town offering the safety of a shelter.

A Safe Distance looks at various services and programs designed to meet the special needs of women in rural, northern, and native communities. The film introduces a group of women in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba, who set up a Safe House project because they felt the need for a confidential approach to providing shelters for battered women and their children. The women of West Bay Reserve in Ontario chose instead to construct a large shelter to stand as a visible reminder that women will no longer tolerate violence at the hands of men in the community.

The film examines these and other innovative approaches to providing much-needed services to battered women in isolated areas. It introduces the women who worked to establish these services, often with very little resources, in communities holding rigid, traditional attitudes toward the woman's place in the family.

Moving On

London, Ontario, has more millionaires proportionately than any other Canadian city, yet when it comes to the number of women who are battered there each year, London is no different from the rest of the country. Wife battering does not respect class, income, race or religion.

What makes London, Ontario, unique, however, is that the city has acknowledged wife battering as a community problem and decided to do something about it. As a result, the Coordinating Committee on Family Violence was established, comprising representatives from the police, social service agencies, hospitals, transition houses, the legal profession, and from support programs for men who batter.

In London, police are willing to lay charges, the court is ready to convict men who batter, and the community has pulled together to provide services to battered women and their children. The London Battered Women's Advocacy Clinic and "Changing Ways," a therapy program for men who batter, are two important elements of the city's innovative attempt to break the cycle of violence.

London is one of only a few communities in Canada that have adopted a coordinated approach to battering, but its success in dealing with the problem makes it a model for the rest of the country.

Audience

The Next Step is a series of films of special interest to:

- Community groups
- Women's groups and networks
- Law enforcement agencies and legal professionals
- Social service, health care and mental health professionals who treat battering victims and offenders
- Students of social work, medicine, psychiatry and criminology
- Shelters for battered women
- School boards and town councils

Screening the Films

These films can be used not only to educate the general public and those who provide services to battered women, but also to stimulate community action to provide, or increase, services in your area. For example, you may want to arrange a screening of one or two of the films and invite members of your town council, government representatives, police, hospital officials and staff from women's centers or transition houses to participate in a panel discussion following the screening. Panel members might describe the services they provide, or would like to see provided, to battered women in your community. Discuss how these services could be improved, and encourage interested participants to establish a working group to that end.

Before Screening the Films

Before screening the films, there may be a major hurdle to overcome — attitude.

While there has been increased attention paid to the issue of battered women during the last few years, many people are still burdened with myths and misconceptions about battered women - who they are, which socio-economic group they belong to, why they stay with violent men, why they return to them, what really happens in a transition house. Their opinions may stem in large part from the fact that society has condoned, and consequently virtually ignored, the problem of wife assault. Wife battering has been called the "ancient privilege" a right granted directly, or indirectly, to a man as the head of a household to chastise his wife. Traditional attitudes, steeped in the law, religion and society at large, die hard. For the audience to fully appreciate these films, it will be necessary to try to dispel some of these attitudes before the screening.

 A short myths/facts exercise before the film will help to open people's minds. Here are a few examples you might want to discuss.

MYTH

There are only a few battered women in Canada.

It only happens in poor families or among people with little education.

If things were that bad, the woman would get out, wouldn't she?

Police won't intervene in family violence situations because it's always the same women who call over and over again for the slightest reasons.

FACT

Over 1 million women are battered each year by their partner.

Wife battering crosses all social, economic and educational lines; it happens in big cities and in quiet country towns.

Many women live in areas in this country where there are no services. Often, too, where services exist, they fall short of the need. There are 228 transition houses in Canada trying to meet the needs of over 1 million women each year.

On the average, a woman is beaten 35 times before she calls the police for help.

Before Screening the Films (cont'd)

MYTH

FACT

"A man's home is his castle" and the police have no right to intervene.

Wife battering is a criminal offence, like any other kind of assault. Police have a legal obligation to lay charges where they have reasonable and probable grounds to believe that an offence has occurred.

Intervening in domestic violence is not risky for the police, it's just a bother. It's something the couples should straighten out themselves.

Statistically, police run the same risk when they intervene in cases of wife assault as they do when they are called to an armed robbery.

Women are beaten because they enjoy it — some women are like that. If women really enjoyed the beatings they wouldn't be turning for help by the thousands to police, hospitals and transitions houses.

- After an exploration of some of these myths and facts, ask members of the audience why they have come to see the films.
- Ask what they would do if they thought their neighbor was being battered by her partner.
- Ask if anyone has ever been frustrated in an effort to help a battered woman. Why?

After the Films

- Compare the service in your community with those in the film/films.
- Discuss the main barriers to assisting battered women in your area.
- Discuss how the situation could be improved.
- Discuss the causes of violence and how they can be eliminated.
- Two of the films discuss the advantage of providing treatment programs for the offender, rather than sentencing a man to prison or levying a fine. Discuss this new approach to dealing with the batterer.

Suggested Activities

What you can do:

- Find out what services for battered women exist in your area. If there is a transition house in your area, does it adequately meet the needs of battered women with regard to space, financial resources, etc.? Make a list of available services in your community with their telephone numbers and addresses. Distribute it in your community and publish it in community newsletters and newspapers.
- Organize a meeting in your community of representatives from institutions or organizations that provide services to battered women police, crown attorney's office, transition house, social services, family support groups, etc. Discuss how these services might be improved through a coordinated effort.
- Find out the policy of the police unit in your area. Do they press charges in wife battering cases or do they rely on the woman to bring charges against her partner? If charges are laid, are the courts ready to convict men who batter? Is there a support group to which the courts can refer men who batter for treatment?

- Lobby your local politicians to make them aware of the problems facing battered women; over-crowding in transition houses, a lack of affordable housing for women who leave their violent partners, unemployment, and an ineffectual legal system.
- Contact the transition house in your area. Find out how you can assist as a volunteer, committee member, community activist.

Suggested Readings

- Dobash, R. Emerson & Russell Dobash. Violence Against Wives. New York: Free Press, 1979.
- Martin, Del. *Battered Wives*. San Francisco: New Guide, 1976.
- Roy, Maria. Battered Women. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, Co. Inc., 1977.
- Walker, Lenore. *The Battered Women*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Walker, Lenore. *The Battered Woman Syndrome*. New York: Springer Publishing Co., Inc., 1984.
- McCarthy, Ginny. Getting Free: A Handbook for Women. Washington: The Seal Press, 1982.

Other Films on the Subject

Available from the NFB

We Will Not Be Beaten

Filmed at a Boston-area shelter for battered women, this documentary features an informal, round-table discussion in which women from all walks of life recount their experiences as victims of wife assault. 35 minutes b & w B 0181 155

The Rites of Violence

The Domestic Youth Intervention Program in Duluth, Minnesota, utilizes community law enforcement, criminal justice and social service agencies in domestic assault cases. This film demonstrates how traditional attitudes can be changed into positive action to end the violence.

28 minutes color C 0181 171

28 minutes color C 0181 171

Loved, Honoured and Bruised

A documentary about a battered farm wife who comes to Osborne House in Winnipeg. She describes her 13-year nightmare and how she eventually left her husband.

25 minutes color C 0180 030

Up the Creek

A film about the repercussions of wife battering, from the husband's point of view.

15 minutes color C 0181 157

For Further Information

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Federal Women's Film Program

Established in 1981, the Federal Women's Film Program is a unique coalition of government agencies and departments, whose objective is to ensure the production and distribution of timely films which reflect women's perspectives on current issues affecting women and society.

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Sylvie's Story	C 0186 504	28 minutes
A Safe Distance	C 0186 505	28 minutes
Moving On	C 0186 506	28 minutes

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