

## THE CENTRE OF THE BACKLASH

by Joan Baril

Every morning I woke up feeling ill. My first morning thoughts were always the same—fourteen women had been massacred in Montreal. Even now, two weeks later, the horror remains. Yesterday in the supermarket I saw their faces on a tabloid magazine at the check-out. I realized I was staring compulsively at them. They were very young and most of them were smiling. I also realized the woman behind me was staring at them too. We just shook our heads at each other—a universal gesture of distress.

I know I am not the only woman who is still grieving, still in shock. At the school where I teach, women still talk about it. Yesterday by chance, I met an old friend and we had coffee together and we talked about the massacre. At a house party, the conversation turned to the Birk's ad in Macleans which was run along side the massacre story—The naked neck and shoulders of a woman with grey blue skin wearing a heavy gold chain around her neck. The caption said, "KNOCK HER DEAD". (I have been told that in a second printing Macleans moved the ad to a different spot in the issue).

It is also horrifying to experience the backlash. The backlash developed with frightening rapidity within hours - not days - after the killings. It was led and fed by certain elements in the media (by no means all the media) and it took place regardless of what was happening in the real world.

The backlash coalesced around the three elements which have been used for centuries to silence and oppress women. 1) the situation is defined by the oppressor and all language is directed toward this new definition 2) all events and responses to events are measured against this re-definition and 3) at no time is credence given to women's definitions, women's analysis, women's experience, women's ideas, women's pain, women's fear, women's emotions, women's needs or women's lives.

Thunder Bay's Northern Woman's Centre was in the centre of the backlash.

I would like to tell you a little bit about the Centre and then describe the events of December 7 and 8 as they happened in Thunder Bay.

### NORTHERN WOMAN'S CENTRE

The Northern Woman's Centre has been in existence since 1973. Over these years it survived through the dedicated work of local women plus bits of government grants most notably funding from the City of Thunder Bay.

In 1986 the local Right-to-Life organization mounted a virulent anti-centre campaign to cut all City funding to the Center of the grounds that the Centre advocated abortion. City councilors were personally lobbied and anti-center letters and petitions arrived from all parts of the province. City council bowed to the pressure and cut all funding. Many people assumed the Centre was finished.

But it wasn't. New women rallied around. The Centre, now in a conspicuous store front location, has had a relatively high profile in the community. At present it has about 230 members.

Ironically, on December 6, the day of the massacre, the Centre held its annual general meeting. The mood was happy in spite of the constant worry about finances (the Center has three short-term CEIC "section-25" workers for specific projects but it is relying solely on donations and fund raising to cover rent and operating costs). But the Centre had survived another year and had provided a full complement of services and events. A major evaluation confirmed our members felt the organization

was worthwhile and doing a good job. New energies and initiatives abounded.

Then we left the meeting and heard the first news on the radio.

#### THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, THE DAY AFTER

The red light was flashing on the answering machine and both phones were ringing that morning. It was to be a day of phone calls for Anna Demetrakopolous and Tracey Cain who were working on projects at the Centre that day. Other women—some members, some not—and also a few sympathetic men, came and went all day.

Later, we found out we were not the only organization deluged with phone calls. The Thunder Bay Physical and Sexual Assault Centre, the Ontario Women's Directorate and even the office of MPP Lynn McLeod also had constant callers. I am sure the same was happening to women's organizations across the country.

Our phone calls sorted themselves into three types. Most were from women (and a few men) who were saddened and horrified by the terrible news and just wanted to talk, offer help or ask questions trying to make sense of it all. The emotion in the voices was palatable. I listened to some of these calls on the answering machine later. Most voices were shaking.

But other women callers were much more distressed. Some were crying. Others said they were terribly frightened. Some related the violence that had been done to them in the past. The killings had triggered off powerful emotions of fear, rage, and pain. Everyone at the Centre was profoundly affected by these calls.

These distressed women were the first to speak of the need for some sort of activity to acknowledge the anguish. So did other callers and visitors, among them representatives of groups such as the Thunder Bay Family Violence Council. Wendy Rankan, a United Church minister, proposed a vigil to be held at the United Church. By late afternoon, two local vigils had been more or less organized. The United Church was to have a public vigil on Friday Night (the next night) and the Centre would help publicize it. We would have a vigil of our own for women only at Unitarian House, a facility we have used many times for events in the past. To the women at the Centre, this seemed the best way to help meet the emotional needs of the women who were phoning in. Later a third memorial was announced to be held at Lakehead University Monday afternoon. The Centre would also help publicize it.

I finished teaching that day at three and like many local women I phoned the Centre. I was told about the United Church vigil the next evening and since there was so little time for publicity I was asked to spread the word. I put a notice on my office door and went to put one in the staff lounge but there was already a notice there. The next morning, I phoned in again and was told about the Centre's vigil on Saturday night and asked to tell any Centre members I might run into. Later on in the morning I got a call from the Centre telling me about the vigil at Lakehead University on Monday afternoon. I put another notice on the office door. I went down to the Centre early Friday afternoon and got caught in the backlash.

#### CREATION OF THE BACKLASH

The backlash started shaping up immediately the day after the tragedy. After a horrified nation tuned to hear the full details in the CBC news, they experienced Barbara Frum on the Journal. The program started with an analysis of the murders; each of the participants including June Callwood, expressed the view that the massacre was related to the misogyny and violence experienced by women. Frum would have none of it. As Melanie Randall later described it in the Globe and Mail, (Dec. 12), "Frum was bullish in her persistent claim that we should not focus on the fact that women

were the targets; we should see the tragedy as something that "diminished all of us"—men and women alike, and by extension, all equally.

"Apparently frustrated with the guests' insistence that the killings were a social expression of men's violence against women, Mrs. Frum repeatedly posed variations of the same general question about mass murder, expressed in deliberately gender-neutral terms. In so doing she not only denied the specific significance of a man's decision to kill women because they were women, she directly challenged women's right to grieve...and to organize against this act of hatred against our gender."

Frum's persistent questions also denied women the opportunity to define the situation; she wanted to minimize the chilling words "You are women. You are feminists.", to marginalize the ghastly last message which blamed women for all evils, the deliberate hunting for women from floor to floor.

The people on the panel seemed merely puzzled by Frum's insistence on this point. Except for June Callwood. Did I detect a shadow of despair on her wise woman face?

Frum was on the right track. On a Montreal hot line show earlier, the men callers had blamed drugs, condom distributors, women who made men feel insecure, everything and anything but ...

In Thunder Bay, late Thursday, a radio station (CKFR) phoned to ask what we were going to do in response to the tragedy. Anna described our plans. However, on air, the bits chosen emphasized two points; 1) the fact that the vigil by being for women, excluded men and 2) the choice of random phrases from Anna's discourse made her message seemed jumpy and poorly thought out. She came across as a flake. By the use of editing, the situation was defined as the media wished. Anna's meanings were simply disappeared.

#### FRIDAY DECEMBER 8

This was a very strange day in Thunder Bay. The calls continued. The cut of town newspapers offered many excellent and thoughtful articles. I can only mention a few.

Michele Landsburg in the Toronto Star warned, in a piece titled "Killer's Rage Was All too Familiar", we would be fooling ourselves to label this crime the act of a madman—"in your town and mine...violent women hating is a daily truth." Doris Anderson's article was titled "A Hatred of Women Thrives in Our Society". Patricia Graham of the Vancouver Province in a balanced article described Lepine as a "social aberration" and warned that "though beyond the abyss (he) was also a misogynist."

Emil Sher, the Montreal writer, also decried societal violence against women and (prophetically as it turned out) noted that women's protests about violence have too often been dismissed as "the shrill protests of feminists".

There were many other thoughtful articles along this line. One which received a great deal of favourable comment from women in Thunder Bay was Stevie Cameron's "Our Daughters Ourselves". (Globe and Mail, Dec.9) Copies of it were distributed free at the Thunder Bay Women's Bookstore.

The editorials of December 8 also focused on a violent and misogynous society as the basis for the crime. The Toronto Globe suggested Lepine "absorbed his attitudes from the society around him" and stated bluntly "If the arrogance of male domination is to be found, naked and unashamed, at the heart of our democratic system and in centres of higher learning, it is evident that a deep seated fear and resentment is at work among many men." The Globe called on men to talk with other men about their continuing oppression of women. I had never seen an editorial such as this in any

major newspaper before; it seemed a portent for positive change. I was wrong.

The Star editorialized that "we can only hope that this tragedy was a turning point in the battle to end hate against women" And the Star also noted, "Yesterday, women across the country held vigils to pray for Wednesday's victims." No condemnation at this point that such actions would drive men and women apart.

Yet in Thunder Bay things were unsettling. We had heard about the hot line show in Montreal. We also knew that threats had been phoned into the NAC office in Toronto. We had a call saying local female engineering students were being harassed at the university.

The local newspaper contained a dismaying editorial titled "Overreacting". The editor dismissed the idea that the murders mirrored anti-female attitudes because the gunman's rage was not directed at all women but only at feminists, "the feminist movement in particular and perhaps at its most strident aspect". (Presumably hating feminists has no connection to women)

The editorial went on to characterize Lepine as a lunatic and insane. "One cannot use his actions as a symbol of women's plight at the hands of society in general." In other words, by defining Lepine as "mad" all analysis is ended and any attempt to link his actions to wider social problems can be considered overreacting.

The same issue contained a courageous letter from seven local men saying they were attempting to come to terms with their "contribution to the oppression of women" and they invited other men to do likewise.

There was a straightforward announcement of the public ecumenical vigil at the United Church and the women only vigil put on by the Centre. Anna was quoted as saying the Centre was trying to meet the needs of women and "We wanted to create a safe place for women who have experience violence" and added that she supported the United Church vigil and any other memorial that would meet the needs of a specific group.

However at the Centre, Anna repeated her belief in the need to protect women, the need to give them (and us) a safe place to grieve, the need to validate their (and our) emotional turmoil to a continuous stream of angry women callers. Some women said they were responding to complaints from their male partner or colleagues. "Why are you doing this. You'll make things worse," they said. But they listened to Anna's patient explanations. Most understood women's pain and could identify with it. And almost all accepted the reasons for the vigil.

A few did not. One Centre member dropped off a copy of her letter to the local editor which stated that when men admit to shame and guilt this "masks the need for both men and women to take responsibility for their own day to day behaviour". I puzzled this letter for a long time. What change in behaviour would she require of the fourteen dead women? Wasn't this simply victim blaming?

But there were also calls from the local radio and tv stations as well as Canadian Press, asking the same questions. And there were a few abusive calls from men of the "I guess you bitches think you're pretty smart" sort. None of these men were interested in attending a vigil. None had heard of the community vigil to be held that night at the United Church. One replied he never would go to a church anyway.

That evening the abusive and threatening calls started at Anna's house. At the University four men approached her and called her a "fucking bitch". The women at the Centre were under incredible stress from being the target of so much rage. They were

dreadfully hurt and angry at the misrepresentation on the radio and later on local talk shows and television.

SATURDAY DECEMBER 9

The local newspaper expressed it clearly. The shootings were caused by "the divisions created in Canadian society by the mere presence of the women's movement." By insisting on barring men from their vigil the Northern Woman's Centre "invites the very negative attitudes against women it strives to erase".

The story made the national media. Almost all reports omitted the fact that there was two other vigil services in Thunder Bay much less describe the Centre's involvement with the other services. The impression created was that in Thunder Bay the women had decided not to allow men to mourn. The language used was instructive. Men were "barred", "denied entry" or "not welcome". The impression created was that there were dozens of men who wanted to attend the Women's Centre vigil but were unable to do so. In fact we received no calls from men who wanted to attend our service. Nevertheless the Sault Star headlined "Thunder Bay vigil excludes Men" (once again no mention of the other services). "NO MEN ALLOWED AT ONTARIO VIGIL" thundered the Toronto Star also carefully omitting any reference to the other memorial services and forgetting their editorial approval given the day before to women holding memorial services. Men were "actually barred" a later Star article stated leaving the impression that men clambered to get in at the door as women organizers barred their way. These impressions were absolutely false and showed a shameful lack of responsibility on the part of the media not to mention a shameful forgetting of what the vigil service was supposed to be about.

"Even if Brian Mulroney were to turn up in Thunder Bay he would be turned away", said the local paper. Other carried on in the same vein, one letter writer saying if the husbands and fathers of the dead women arrived, they too would be barred.

A spokesman for the "other side" was soon found. A local alderman was quoted as saying that our actions were "mind terrorism". He was quoted (without further explanation) by almost every major newspaper and news broadcast.

Although Anna's explanations were usually quoted correctly, it was as if she hadn't spoken. She might as well have wrapped her words in a rock and thrown them into Lake Superior. No credence of any sort was given to women's desires or needs. We were thundered against in the press and on the radio. The local talk show host claimed he had thirty five male callers who were angry that men were excluded. The men objected: "Why must we be associated with the crazed killer?" And there is the nub of the matter. The callers to the talk line were not interested in attending a service; they believe the very fact of women getting together indicated they were being accused of the crime. They interpreted not being invited as an insult. Clearly, they believed it was their right to go wherever they wanted.

We now began to get calls from feminists across the country wanting to know what was going on. Again the patient explanations and again almost all women said that by talking to us they had a different picture from the one they had picked up in the media. But in general, by now, the shift in focus from women's pain to men's perception of loss of rights was complete. As the same media mentioned just a day previously on December 8, we do indeed live in very misogynous society.

#### THE BACKLASH

I do not want to give the impression that a memorial service in Thunder Bay created a backlash. As I have mentioned at the start of this article, the backlash was building from the beginning as shown by Barbara Frum's interview and the Montreal

talk show. Incidents—some of them terrifying—were happening across the country. A University of Toronto employee brought a handgun to work and made favourable comments about the killings. The virulent reaction to our memorial service was caused by the building backlash, not visa versa.

The elements in the backlash shifted rapidly from (1) Frum's contention that women were not the target to (2) suggestions from many media sources that the murders were just the work of a irrational madman without wider significance to (3) the contention that radical feminists were using this tragedy as a platform against men.

By December 13, The Star, again forgetting their previous commitment to fighting misogyny wrote an article about "the confusion" caused by the killings and stated some men "find the entire feminist analysis of the mass murders irrelevant, it not personally offensive".

The same article mentioned a male only service without comment (Star Dec. 13). As one Centre member so wisely put it, when men get together it is accepted it is for a serious purpose; when women get together it is to exclude men.

I want to make only one more comment on the backlash. That was the Mike Duffy show aired on Sunday, December 10 and taped in Thunder Bay Friday, December 9. This show reveals a further mutation in the backlash. Anna agreed to be the Centre's representative and be televised at the local TV station and answer Duffy's questions through a telephone hook-up. I went with her as moral support.

The show opened with the usual questions about why Thunder Bay had decided not to allow men to mourn the victims of the massacre. Anna patiently explained once again that there was a community service open to all on Friday night. This was passed over in silence. (After the taping, Duffy said he was not aware of the other services in Thunder Bay and said it was a shame that this fact had not been more widely publicized!)

Once again as she had some for newspapers and radio hosts, Anna reiterated the reasons for a woman only vigil as well as a community vigil. I knew that in her mind, as in my mind, was the memory of the emotion and distress that women felt and were still feeling but how to make people understand, believe it, want to help. She talked about emotional scarring and how people, both men and women, tend to underestimate it. She talked about how the slayings had triggered intense fear in women who had experienced violence. She talked about the need to be supportive of women in pain and that if men really want to be supportive they should do that in a way women ask them to do.

Again it was as if she hadn't said a word. No response came from Duffy. Instead he called Thunder Bay the "emerging symbol of polarization between the sexes." He noted that we had been labeled mind terrorists. At one point he said something very revealing. "Surely the object of this whole exercise (the vigil) was to draw men and women together." Having created polarization, having heightened the misogynist tendencies around us, the media now was expecting us to readjust our mourning to fit in with their definition of what mourning should be in order to solve the problem they had created. No better example of the power of the media and the power of definition (the power to create) can be found.

Duffy's questions became more and more aggressive and these aggressive questions (but not all the answers) were edited out for the showing. Wasn't Anna doing what Marc Lepine did by separating men and women? ( So absurd and insulting a question! We hope to heal women; Lepine wanted to kill them. There seems to me to be a fundamental difference here). Aren't your actions paralleling those of Lepine, Duffy asked? And so on.

In a second TV interview with a woman from Queen's University Duffy referred to feminist leaders in Thunder Bay who say "men are at fault - all men." Certainly Anna nor any other Centre representative ever made such an absurd statement. Duffy continued to emphasize that our memorial service was creating the problem. "It seems to me, if we widen the gulf between men and women, the madman wins."

#### AFTERMATH

The memorial service at the United Church was well attended by the people of Thunder Bay. Many Centre members attended, many with husband and boyfriends. It was a beautiful and dignified expression of grief.

The next night about sixty women attended the candlelight vigil put on by the Women's Centre. Because of the intense feeling of powerless and silencing some women had experienced in their past and others were experiencing in their present, it was decided to let women speak. However the facilitator, Gwen O'Reilly, cautioned that the negative publicity should be left aside and the participants should concentrate on the purpose of the vigil. We sang. Candles were lit around the circle. One woman read a beautiful poem she had written for the occasion, another sang "The Lord is My Shepherd", another read the names of the dead women. Like many others I sobbed. Letters to the editor were read. A collection for a memorial was started. We sang again-We Shall Overcome- which seemed to fit exactly.

About three quarters through the ceremony a slight young woman slipped out the door. I was in the last row and because the ceremony was emotional and many people were crying, I decided to go after her and make sure she was all right. I met her on the front steps. She said it was a moving ceremony and that she too had suffered from abuse. I asked her again if she was feeling all right and she said she was fine and that she was a reporter from the local paper. Then she walked away.

Her article was misleading and negative. It was a collage of details (some of them false) which in sum made the ceremony seem to be both ludicrous and hostile. Reverend Prinselaar of Nipigon protested the Chronicle Journal's coverage. He wrote "The critique of the Northern Woman's Centre's decision to have a vigil...points to a situation far more grave than even the slaying of the 14 women in Montreal. Behind the article lies the assumption that men know better, even when it comes to the expression of grief. To make the participation of men an issue of "justice" or "rights" is a serious distortion of the issue." He went on to describe the newspaper's description of the service as a as lacking "in the most basic ethical standards". He concluded that "the patent male chauvinism, paternalism and need for power even in a situation as tragic as this one illustrates how deep the roots of violence go." The editor followed this letter with a long defence and stated the reporter at our vigil could not ask questions because she was "concerned for her safety". Sometimes the mind just boggles. Nevertheless our lovely gentle vigil was misrepresented as some kind of belligerent rant against men.

Fortunately we received many supportive letters in the press. Also the local men's group supported us by holding a supporting vigil outside the hall at the same time.

#### AFTERLASH

The negative publicity may seriously injure the Centre. The local newspaper claimed (wrongly) that the Centre receives public money and this funding should be used for all people in Thunder Bay. As mentioned, the Centre does not receive any government grants at present, but it is applying for a grant to put on a women's conference. Will this negative publicity have an affect on our application?

We depend on donations entirely. Will the controversy have an affect here?

As the days went on, a spate of articles appeared blaming feminists for "using" the killings. For example Jeanni Read in the Vancouver Province (Dec. 10) claims that, although feminists were "impeccable correct in their societal critique", we were "using" the dead young women as symbols and so dehumanizing them. Like many other similar articles and letters, the author condemns violence against women but at the same time doesn't want the killings connected to it. There seems to be little real logic in that stance.

There are also questions being asked about the validity of women's studies courses. Perhaps they are "divisive". (Globe and Mail, Dec.26) As ever, silencing of women is easy if it is generally agreed that any discussion of women's issues reveals a hatred of men. In this way, when we bring up women's problems we immediately have to go on the defensive, state we don't hate men, etc. before any discussion can continue.

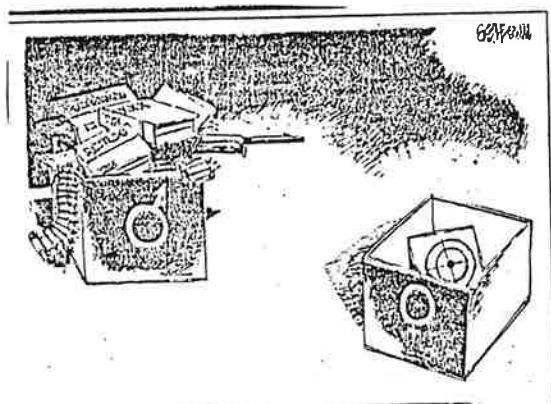
One also sees the constant attempt to differentiate between women and feminists. According to this definition, feminists are extremists while women, on the other hand, are not extremists because "they don't make an issue of things" ie they are silent.

Perhaps we'll leave the last words on the backlash to the journalists. Thomas Walkom of the Toronto Star in a prophetic article (Monday December 11) described neo-conservatism in Canada as focusing on feminists as the enemy. He describes widely read magazines like Edmonton's Weekly Report which blames feminism for the decline in education, the family and all cultural values in Canada. Walkom believes this type of thinking is strong and spreading.

Melanie Randall (Globe and Mail, Dec. 12) related the mechanisms of reaction. She noted among other examples that as early as the day after the killings CFPL-TV (London) termed a rally at the university a "feminist diatribe". She says conditions have been created in which it is now "inappropriate" or "extremist" to view the killings as an act of violence against women. "How can we possible account for this chilling display of threatening and hateful behaviour...?" Nevertheless Randall is optimistic and hopes that feminists, progressives and pro-feminist men can work together towards a equal, peaceful world.

I hope she is right.

Note: A complete clipping file is available at the Centre in the resource library.



Editorial cartoon, "Male Violence against Women" (Globe and Mail, 9 Dec. 1989)



Symbol used with article on the Women's Centre's memorial vigil (Thunder Bay Chronicle Journal, 10 Dec., 1989)