

Gang of uprising women makes progress, over time

Equality has been too long coming, and of course there's been a backlash, but the struggle goes on

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Thirty-five years ago, nobody said the word "rape" at the dinner table -- except perhaps in Saskatchewan. Yet even there by the 1970s, it was such an uncomfortable word that the oilseed crop was renamed canola.

Rape was something women talked about only among themselves and even then, some never even told their closest friends.

But in Vancouver, a group of feminists took that word in 1973 and made it their own. They founded Vancouver Rape Relief, setting it up as a collective because they were tired of what they saw as patriarchal hierarchies.

"We knew that you can't fight men off one by one. It required a communal response," says Lee Lakeman, who was one of the early members. "You've got to have a gang."

The gang started Canada's first crisis centre. In the past 35 years, more than 31,000 individual women have called the number -- 604 872-8212. This year, Rape Crisis volunteers expect to answer 1,400 calls.

In 1978, they originated the Take Back the Night March, which has now spread across Canada and is an annual reminder that women still do not feel safe in their own communities.

And in 1981, despite criticism that these "uprising women" were damaging the sacred institution of the family by providing a safe place for battered women and their children, the gang opened one of Canada's first transition houses. So far, it has provided a safe haven and hope to 3,000 women and



CREDIT: Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun, Files

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their children.

Vancouver Rape Relief's members have never been in the struggle only to be service providers, they want societal change. They began by demanding that Canadians confront the issues of violence against women by criminalizing rapists and abusers and providing support to their victims.

At the root of all of their actions is a simple driving cause.

"Over 35 years, we've been able to reveal that rape and all violence against women is a kind of linchpin that holds together the inequality of women and is the result of inequality of women," Lakeman says.

They want equality and they're willing to fight against anything that supports inequality -- whether it's pornography and prostitution (which they believe are simply other examples of society's tolerance of violence against women) or police reluctance to enforce the laws that protect women.

Of course, Rape Relief wasn't in the struggle alone. Dozens of other women's organizations sprang up in the 1970s, and as one big gang in 1982 they managed against heavy odds to have an equality clause included in Canada's new Constitution.

But that didn't initially translate into a lot of empathy or even understanding.

A month after the Constitution was patriated, Vancouver East MP Margaret Mitchell rose in the House of Commons to talk about how the justice system failed to protect women and failed to prosecute wife-beaters and rapists. When she noted that at the time it was estimated one in 10 Canadian husbands beat their wives regularly, there was so much laughter and joking, she was forced to stop. (Current estimates are that nearly one in three women are abused.)

A furious Mitchell said when order was finally restored: "I do not think this is a laughing matter."

As Mitchell writes in her recently released book, *No Laughing Matter*, it wasn't just rape that was taboo. No one was talking about other inequities and problems. Then, there was no maternity leave, no equal pay for work of equal value, no access to abortion. As the status of women critic, Mitchell writes that one of her primary concerns was the feminization of poverty, something that remains a serious issue today.

There was -- and still is -- no national child-care program and no pensions for homemakers and stay-at-home moms.

In 1992, Canada's first female justice minister and first female prime minister, Kim Campbell, introduced legislation that Rape Relief had lobbied hard for. The so-called rape shield law ensures that a rape victim's sexual history can't be used in court, opening the way for husbands to be charged for sexually assaulting their wives.

What Rape Relief hasn't done is work itself out of business. While women's equality remains elusive, it's worth celebrating a group such as Rape Relief that has survived and thrived even though it went for a decade without provincial funding during the Social Credit years.

And today -- the 97th annual International Women's Day -- it's worth taking a moment away to realize that progress has been made.

On the first International Women's Day in 1908, only two countries in the world allowed women to vote in national elections -- New Zealand (1893) and Finland (1906).

(It's not really a surprise then that International Women's Day in countries such as Ukraine is more like Valentine's or Mother's Day, with men buying flowers and chocolates for the women in their lives, than a celebration of feminism.)

My grandma was one of the first Canadian women to get the vote. She was a suffragette who marched the streets of Regina demanding equal rights. In 1916, the three Prairie provinces were the first in Canada to allow women to vote in provincial elections. As a young widow, she later ran for a seat on city council and lost -- badly. That ended her political career, but didn't diminish her firm belief that women must be full participants in society.

B.C. women got the vote in 1917. That year, Ottawa let women who were British subjects vote on behalf of "close relatives," who were away fighting in the First World War. It was another two years before they were deemed capable of voting on their own -- unless they were first nations or Asian.

Not that they were anywhere close to being considered equals; Canadian women weren't even considered persons until 1929. To get that acknowledgement, five Alberta women had to appeal to the British Privy Council.

Today, it's possible that Hillary Clinton could win the most powerful job in the world. In Surrey, the majority on city council are women. It's been too long coming.

And of course there's a backlash. In western democracies, there's a push to legalize brothels, allow the use of shariah law and provide government support to polygamist men. There's the explosion in pornography on the Internet, increased trafficking of women and children and sex tourism.

"Men are now trying new strategies against uprising women. But they don't stand a chance in hell," Lakeman says sanguinely. "What these are, are the dying acts of a dying patriarchy."

The gang is now too big to stop.

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