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The Words We Use

We live in a society where violence against women still exists, despite the efforts of generations of people who have worked to end it. Violence against women is insidious and deeply rooted in our cultures, our institutions and our religions. We gain insight into the present from looking at the past. A key to understanding women's history is seeing that the suffering of individual women is linked. Understanding of our current situation comes as we see that connections can be made between a woman being battered by her husband, a child being abused by a male relative, a woman being harassed at work and a teenager being sexually assaulted on the street. These connections have to do with systems of oppression that have existed for centuries, systems so entrenched we have difficulty seeing them at all.

This section begins with several definitions of concepts that are helpful in understanding violence against women. This is followed by a historical overview of how these concepts were developed. Next, there is a summary of how the Christian church has at times sanctioned violence against women. Finally, this section will close by outlining how the struggle for women's rights and the rise of feminism made significant steps towards reducing that violence.

patriarchy: A system of male dominance over women and children that is institutionalized in social and political structures such as government, education and religion. It is characterized by a hierarchical ordering of all relationships, with men holding power in all the important institutions of society.¹ Patriarchy is seen in the social, economic, political and cultural inequality between women and men. This inequality is maintained through language, myth, symbol and belief about the superiority of men over women.²



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sexism: Assigns value on the basis of sex: used to justify systemic prejudice against women. A sexist attitude is a deeply rooted attitude that men are superior and women are inferior.

abuse: The violence that takes place within a relationship of trust, where the person with more power abuses the person with less power.

feminism: A movement of women and men who have worked to expose and eliminate prejudice against women.

feminist: A person who embraces feminism, who uses feminism as a framework for understanding the way gender relations have oppressed women.

These definitions are important for understanding how violence works in the lives of women. Sexism is not, however, the only system of oppression. There are other systems that interact with sexism to make life more difficult for some women. Women of colour struggle from both sexism and racism, as people discriminate against them because of their gender and their skin colour. In a similar way, women with physical challenges, lesbian women and newcomers to this country, to name a few, must deal with multiple types of discrimination. Eradicating violence against women is not enough to end the suffering of women. However, the work to end violence against women plays an important part in creating a world where all people are valued.

Patriarchal Origins

In order to understand the way patriarchy works in our society today, we must understand the roots of patriarchy in our history. The oldest patriarchal society with which most of us are familiar is the Hebrew world of the patriarchs. The Hebrew Bible reveals that society was dominated by men. This is seen in an obvious way by the predominance of male characters in the Bible. The stories are primarily written about men. God is described as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There are female characters in the Bible: we do know that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were married, but these women are generally not central characters. We hear about Sarai because she was married to Abram, we hear about Leah and Rebekah and Bilhah and Zilpah because they bore children to Jacob. Miriam is known as Moses' sister. Patriarchy in the Hebrew Bible is shown by the structure of the family where men were the heads of households and membership was counted through the male line.

We hear tantalizing little pieces of women's stories. In the story of Jacob and his twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes of Israel, there is mention of the fact that Leah, Jacob's wife, also had a daughter named Dinah. Genesis 34 describes the rape of Dinah and how her brothers killed to avenge her violation. We know that Dinah was assaulted, but the story as it is written is about her brothers and their actions. The story is peripherally about Dinah; she does not have a speaking role, and we don't know her reaction to the man who raped her. We do know that she passes out of recorded history after this event.³

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There are a few exceptions where women take centre stage, like the story of Esther. Undoubtedly, there were many women in biblical times who, like Esther, lived heroic and faithful lives, but we do not hear much about them. The female characters we do read about are often presented in ambiguous ways, as is the case with Eve or Miriam. The Bible was written in a patriarchal society, and the stories reflect those attitudes. Women were not valued as much as men in that time, and so they play a background role. The stories we do read about women show us that their lives were affected by sexism. Their gender determined that they would be treated in oppressive ways.

This dominance of male characters in the Bible reflects the fact that male dominance was institutionalized in that society. Women were not allowed to hold positions of power in ancient Israel. There were no Israelite queens or priests. The laws recorded in Scripture provide many examples of the ways in which women's lives were restricted to a certain role. This is not to say that there were never any powerful women in Israel; rather, it means that only extraordinary women under extraordinary circumstances were able to hold positions of power. The institutions of family, religion and government were designed to keep women in a subordinate role.

Israel was similar to other patriarchal societies in that same period of history. For example, in nearby Mesopotamia, laws stated that a man could pledge his wife, concubine and his children by them into slavery to repay his debts.⁴ If a son taken into slavery was killed, the creditor's son was to be killed. There was no penalty if wives, concubines or daughters were mistreated or killed. Women were treated as the property of their husbands.

The story of Sarai and Hagar in Genesis is an example of this same attitude. When Sarai was unable to bear children, another woman was needed to bear those children. Sarai gives Abram her slave Hagar to bear children for him. Hagar, as a slave and a woman, had no power to choose whether or not she would submit to this decision. That she was not happy with the decision is made clear by her choice to run away.

Some societies, however, offered some limited freedom to women in certain circumstances. In Mesopotamia, upper-class women often held considerable economic, legal and judicial power as they looked after their families' interests. However, their power was given to them by men, and it could be taken away without any recourse on the women's part.⁵

In early Rome, husbands and fathers were allowed to put a woman to death without a public trial. Although such legally prescribed executions were rarely carried out, they served as an indication that physical abuse of women was generally accepted. The subjugation of women is illustrated in a speech by Cato the Censor. He describes the appropriate response of both husbands and wives to marital infidelity: "If you should take your wife in adultery you may with impunity put her to death without a trial, but if you should commit adultery or indecency, she must not presume to lay a finger on you, nor does the law allow it."⁶

In the New Testament period, society was still patriarchal. Women had limited legal rights. A woman caught in adultery faced stoning, while her partner was not treated in the same way. A woman could not hold property or positions of power. Women who were menstruating were considered unclean. Men avoided touching them at this time,



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just as they avoided touching a dead body or someone who had leprosy.

Jesus challenged many common assumptions about women. He used women as illustrations in his stories. He proclaimed that a "harlot" who believed would enter heaven before religious leaders who were denying him. He saved the life of a woman caught in adultery, reminding those who would stone her that they were not without sin. He was not afraid to touch a woman who was considered unclean.

Jesus also included women in his circle of followers. We hear of Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, Joanna, Susanna and Salome. He declared his divine mission to both the Samaritan woman and to Martha of Bethany. Women played a central role in stories of the resurrection. While the New Testament gives us glimpses that women were active in following Jesus, we hear little about these faithful women today.⁷

There are indications in accounts of the early church that women were powerful witnesses to Christ, and led Christian communities. However, in the letters of the New Testament, we see that men tried to limit women's prophetic roles by suggesting that they should be silent in church. Many women continued to be active in the early centuries of the Christian church, although church fathers such as Jerome, Tertullian, Augustine and John Chrysostom emphasized women's inferiority.⁸

Women have been present and active in the church throughout its history, even though they were not officially allowed to hold positions of power until recently. An exception was made for those women who chose celibacy; nuns were allowed to head organizations of women, but even those women were under the power of the male hierarchy.¹⁰ The Beguine movement in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is one of the few examples of a women's movement that was powerful and not controlled by men.

Gerda Lerner, a feminist historian, remarks that, even though women have been victimized by patriarchy, it is a mistake to conceptualize women primarily as victims. She writes: "Women are essential and central to creating society; they are and always have been actors and agents in history."¹¹ It is also important to note that women were not the only oppressed group in patriarchal societies. Power was institutionally denied to many people. Foreigners, people with physical or mental challenges, poor people or slaves were among those who were oppressed.

In this patriarchal society, prejudice against women was systemically maintained. The political, legal and religious systems which conspired to keep women subordinate to men were supported by the assumption that this was "the way the world was", the way God had ordained the world to be.

Writing Our Own History

While women throughout history may have recognized that life was harder for women than for men, they usually didn't have the ability or means to record their thoughts. Gerda Lerner suggests that knowing one's own history and interpreting it is the key to ending oppression.¹² But patriarchal attitudes have meant that many women were systematically denied access to education, and few found the time or space to think communally about their lives in terms of a larger group.

However, there have been exceptional women who were able to speak about their

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lives and find the space to write down their thoughts. These women were often the wives or daughters of influential men, or they were women who had chosen a life of celibacy in service of the church. But these exceptional women who were thinking and writing about women's role in society rarely had their works published. Even if they had the means to publish their own works, their books were not kept or discussed. This meant that later women writers did not have a body of women's thinking upon which to build.

In a sense, each generation of women thinkers had to re-invent the wheel, not knowing that anyone had thought their ideas before them. The women's movement, or what came to be known as the feminist movement, gradually developed in Western society in conjunction with women's access to education.

The European thinker Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) was one of the forerunners of the Western feminist movement.¹³ In her book *Vindications of the Rights of Women*, she suggested that women and men were equal and should be treated that way. She came from a violent and poverty-stricken family and wrote of trying to protect her mother from her father's blows. In her final unfinished novel called *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft tells the story of two women from different social classes. The story includes depictions of rape and sexual violence, poverty, men's power and women's relative helplessness. Isolated voices like Wollstonecraft's railed against the prejudice that crippled women's lives and the apathy of a society that did not question violence against women. Women were subordinate to men, and that was the way the world was.

Legally Sanctioned Violence

Historically, most European countries allowed husbands to inflict moderate punishment on their wives. In the Middle Ages, governments intervened only when the woman was killed by her husband.¹⁴ Gradually, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, limits were placed on the type of punishment men could inflict on women. Puritan thinkers spoke out against the abuse of women by their husbands, suggesting that men should not lay violent hands on their wives.¹⁵ Laws evolved that limited the force a man could use, but there is little evidence that these laws were enforced. Obstetrical literature often mentioned in passing that women miscarried after being beaten by their husbands; this was simply presented as a fact along with the other medical details.¹⁶

Both the legal system and the church stated that men were responsible for the actions of their wives, therefore they were given the power to punish their wives as they saw fit. In nineteenth century British law, a husband was allowed to punish his wife with what was described as a reasonable instrument: a rod not thicker than his thumb. That is where we get the phrase "rule of thumb".¹⁷ The law did not prohibit violence against women, but regulated what was seen as excessive force.

In the book *Canadian Women: A History*, the authors point to the reality of violence against women in Canada's history, citing examples as varied as a Mi'qmac woman in Nova Scotia in the seventeenth century, a woman living in Louisbourg in New France, and a young Montreal woman working in a factory in the late 1800s.¹⁸ Husbands were in charge of their wives, and could confine them to their house, control their right to work outside the home, and use physical punishment against them.



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In the 1800s, rape was a crime punishable by death; however, the victim was not seen to be the woman herself, but rather the woman's husband or father. In some cases it appears that a rape conviction required proof that violent resistance to the rape occurred. Other cases assumed that if pregnancy resulted, it was not rape. In any case, trials about rape such as these were heard before an all-male jury.¹⁹

Clara Brett Martin, who in the 1890s became Canada's first woman lawyer, talked about the state of marriage in Canada as a "suspension of the independent existence of the wife, and an absorption by the husband of the woman's person and all her belongings."²⁰ Women had no legal recourse against their husbands. They could not charge them with rape or testify in court against them. After 1870, women could sue their husbands for damage to their property, but not for damage to their person. Women who left their husbands after repeated beatings were reprimanded for failing to leave after the first beating, while those who left after one beating were reprimanded for not being patient with their husbands.²¹

Property laws in the 1800s were entirely biased in the direction of men. A woman by law would inherit one-third of the husband's property upon his death, but if she left before he died, she was entitled to nothing. A man owned his children as well, and women who left their husbands could not take their children with them.

Divorce was possible but difficult to obtain in Canada in the 1800s. A woman could receive a divorce from her husband if he committed adultery, but only if she could prove that he also was guilty of rape, bestiality, bigamy, cruelty or desertion for at least two years.²² The marriages of women in Quebec were only dissoluble by death.²³ As late as 1929, Quebec law allowed a man to get legal separation from his wife on the grounds of adultery, while at the same time a wife had to prove that her husband had brought his new partner with him to live in the family home.²⁴

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), an organization now best remembered for its campaign to discourage alcohol consumption, concerned itself with the plight of women. The women's organization was non-denominational, but the centrality of the Christian emphasis is reflected in the choice of the group's name. Letitia Youmans, an early WCTU activist, spoke of the misery caused by domestic violence.²⁵ The WCTU expressed concern about young vulnerable women who were attracted to urban centres and then seduced by unscrupulous men.²⁶ Women advocated temperance from alcohol as a possible solution to the problem of women's suffering. The WCTU's lack of success in reforming society through temperance encouraged them to look at the powerlessness of women in the public sphere, and spurred them on to advocate for the right to vote. Women's suffrage was believed to be the way that women could effectively exercise their moral influence on society. The WCTU movement was not inclusive of immigrant or aboriginal women, as people from the non-dominant culture were often viewed as inferior and in need of enlightenment.

The influence of organized women's groups gradually had an effect on legislation. Between 1872 and 1907, Married Women's Property acts were passed in all the provinces except Alberta. Under these laws, a married woman's property and her earnings were legally her own. Gradually, provinces started instituting laws that helped



women who had been abandoned by their husbands, although this did not include women who left their husbands, even for reasons of cruelty.²⁷

Churches: Part of the Problem, Part of the Solution

Throughout its history, the Christian church has traditionally supported the belief that men were responsible for their wives, teaching that, as the head of the household, the husband was divinely sanctioned to maintain order. Just as adults were expected to punish children, so the husband was divinely sanctioned to punish his wife. For centuries, therefore, the church turned a blind eye to violence within the home.

Early feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Antony called for justice for women from the context of their strong Christian roots. Sojourner Truth, a black woman who had been enslaved, was one of the first activists who made the connection between slavery and violence against women. Sojourner Truth was motivated by her strong Christian faith to become an itinerant minister. She also challenged the sexism of the abolition movement, which was working to get the vote for black men, but not for black women: "There is a great deal of stir about colored men getting their rights but not a word about the colored women's theirs, you see, the colored man will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring, because if we wait 'till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again."

In the early 1900s, women in North America were starting to organize on many levels. One of the most active spheres of organization was within Protestant churches. Women's groups met to send out missionaries, to build churches and to reform society. These women's groups supported women's right to vote as a way of making society a better place. This included giving women property rights and the legal ability to have custody of their children. Theological movements, such as the Social Gospel movement, believed that it was the churches' responsibility to reform society. Improving the conditions that oppressed women was a part of that social agenda.²⁸

Not all sectors of the Christian church, however, were happy with these feminist reforms. From the turn of the century to the 1930s, leaders in the all-male Roman Catholic hierarchy in Quebec, for example, spoke out strongly against women's rights, suggesting that women's God-ordained role was in the private, domestic sphere.²⁹

Some feminists were openly critical of the church, and its teaching of female submission. Other feminists chose to live sexually free lifestyles. These criticisms and rejection of church teachings on women shocked many Christians in the early part of the 20th century. Some churches distanced themselves from the feminist movement because they believed it challenged biblical values.

The movement of feminist reforms in Canadian churches was not always altruistically motivated. Some reforms were motivated, at least in part, by the belief in racial superiority of whites over immigrant, Aboriginal and Métis groups. British-Canadian culture was seen as vastly superior to that of others, such as people of Eastern European or Aboriginal heritage. Issues of class were also critical, as more advantaged Christians patronized the poor, believing they knew what was best for them.



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The negative side of the reform movement is most clearly illustrated by the system of residential schools. At the same time that Protestant reformers were championing change for women, Christian organizations were helping the federal government to develop the residential school system for Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginals were in a particularly vulnerable position due to political, economic and legal oppression.

Residential school education was a system where native children were removed from their homes for lengthy periods of time and sent away, often over great distances, to boarding schools. These schools were often run by Christian denominations. In the schools, children were isolated from their traditions and cultures. They were not allowed to speak their native language. With no one to advocate for them, children suffered neglect and abuse, both physical and sexual, from workers in the school.

The painful history of the treatment of native people in the residential school system is slowly being written, and the voices of those who had been neglected and abused are being heard. Many cases of abuse are being processed through the court system, and financial settlements are being awarded to the victims. Some churches have begun to explore the history of the residential schools and seek reconciliation with native communities.

Black women who write history point out that they have a different story to tell than white feminist writers. White feminists have been critical of the church for hindering women's freedom and preventing needed reforms, but black women have often experienced church differently. The exclusion of blacks from many white churches brought about the establishment of new churches led and populated by black people. Originating because of discrimination, these churches became a place where black culture and life could be cultivated. They have often been a place of empowerment.

The Christian church has, at times, been at the vanguard of reform that would alleviate violence against women, yet the church has also helped to perpetuate abuse. Further, the church has not always been comfortable with criticisms that feminists and others have mounted against its own patriarchal structures. For example, while many churches supported women's suffrage and women's right to hold political office, these same churches were often reluctant to ordain women to positions of leadership.³⁰

As we examine our churches and society, we can see how the patriarchal attitudes which influenced our history are still shaping the beliefs and culture of our world today.

End notes

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2. *Changing the Landscape: Final Report, The Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women*. Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1993, 14.
3. For an interesting fictional recreation of Dinah's life, read *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant (New York: Picador, 1998).
4. Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, 90.

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5. Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, 214.
6. Aulus Gellius, *The Attic Nights*, (3 vols) trans. by John C. Rolfe (New York: Loeb Classics, 1927) I, p. 323. Quoted in Julia O'Faolain and Lauro Martines, eds., *Not in God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 36.
7. For a feminist look at the New Testament, including women's roles and their subordinate position, see *Searching the Scriptures, Volume II: A Feminist Commentary*, edited by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998).
8. A thorough and well written history of women in the church is *Women and Christianity* by Mary Malone (Ottawa: Novalis, 2000).
9. See the chapter entitled "The Effects of Christianity" in *A History of Their Own* Vol. 1, by Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67-84.
10. See a discussion of Beguine spirituality in *Women and Christianity* by Mary Malone, 124-149.
11. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 5.
12. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 5.
13. For an account of her life, see *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* by Clare Tomalin (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974).
14. Anderson and Zinsser, *A History of Their Own*, Vol. I, 438.
15. Paterson, *Men's Role in Stopping Woman Abuse*, 150.
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19. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 92-93.
20. Quoted in Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 88-89.
21. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 148.
22. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 89.
23. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 147.
24. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 284.
25. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 173.
26. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 153.
27. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 187-188.
28. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 193.
29. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 202, 276.
30. Prentice et. al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 272-275.

