Sexual Assault in Canada

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Where Has All The Anger Gone?

Diana Yaros

While Lise Gotell and Meagan Johnston explore the anonymous and informal activism of the Garneau Sisterhood, Diana Yaros reconsiders the work of feminist advocates who work in women’s shelters, rape crisis centres, and women’s centres across the country. She describes the impact that government funding and government “partnership” have had in de-radicalizing women’s grassroots organizations, but argues that there is no less need for feminist advocates to challenge police responses to women’s disclosures of sexual assault, to accompany women to the criminal trials of their attackers, and to denounce the discriminatory practices of the legal system to the media and the public. Diana highlights her centre’s effort to translate feminist theory into action by centring the needs of immigrant and refugee women, including their attempts to seek asylum in Canada, as fundamental to challenging the status quo “banalization” of sexual assault.

Thirty-five years ago, we gathered in kitchens, in living rooms, and in greasy spoons, to connect with other women over our outrage at the appalling injustice following our experiences of rape, incest, and other forms of sexual violence. We began to speak out and to organize ourselves into groups that could take action against the many forms of sexist violence.

We were going to educate, demand law reform, and insist on respectful police response to our complaints. In Montreal we organized the first “Take Back the Night” in August of 1980: hundreds of women came. The next year thousands of women came as we walked through alleyways, parks, and other dark areas, taking strength from our numbers and understanding that because of that solidarity, change just might be possible. We even had our theme songs, our own Ferron with “Testimony,” Holly Near with “Fight Back,” and Kim Baryluk with “Warrior Song.” We would send a call out for a political action and women came! That was how we saw our jobs: using opportunities to bring the injustices facing raped women to public attention and pushing for change.
In the seventies and eighties, we insisted that women were the authority on issues of violence against women. We developed an analysis that was feminist, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive and a language that defined what that meant for Aboriginal and racialized women, women with disabilities, lesbians, and immigrant and refugee women and many others. Our vocabulary reflected our analysis and we insisted that this be the official understanding of rape as a form of social control of men over women. We believed that law reform and public policy were the ways to achieve an end to all the violence. Thirty-five years later, what were our successes and what were our miss-takes?

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES
We began to get regular funding, small amounts at first, and then enough for salaries. We lobbied for increased funding, arguing that we had “wait lists.” In Montreal, those lists were often over one-hundred women long. How did we get to that point? Women were calling by the hundreds; many had been assaulted years ago, victims of incest or other sexual assaults. For many of those women, talking to us was the first time they were able to speak about what had happened to them, to someone who would listen and respect them and their choices. We ran support groups, we responded to the distress of those women by providing what we felt didn’t exist anywhere else — a feminist counselling service. Social services agencies panicked when they heard the words rape and incest and were referring their cases to us. We hoped that by sharing our coping and survival strategies we were empowering the women who came to our centre. We tried to balance the direct service axis with prevention, education, and advocacy.

Then we became the victims of our own success. We got more money to continue providing the services that the state was not. Across Quebec we began hiring social workers, sexologists, criminologists, and psychologists along with feminist activists. Did we import neoliberal feminism along with the professionalization and institutionalization of our centres, something we had vowed not to do?

It crept in without our really being aware of it. There was always another emergency to respond to. After over ten years of trying to respond in this way, at best, I can say that we did make a difference in the lives of thousands of individual women over the years, but at what cost? Who was responding to the systemic discrimination that women face in the criminal justice system, in the immigrant and refugee process, in health and social services, and in public policies? If we were profession-
al and credible in the eyes of our funders, then where did our loyalties lie? To whom did we owe allegiance?

We needed to be accountable for the public funds that we were spending. To whom did we owe this accountability: the bureaucrats, many of them feminist allies, or the women who were raped? When did the work we were doing become about helping “them” and not us?

Many centres were focused on establishing stable and recurrent funding in the early years. One strategy was to criticize the lack of available services for raped women and incest survivors. But once we got the funding, we got caught up in the idea that greater equality was being achieved through improved legislation and government recognition. For some of us who found ourselves in positions of privilege, this was perhaps true; however, many marginalized women still faced incredible barriers to justice and to better access to decision-making positions in our centres.

What was the political atmosphere in the late eighties and nineties in Quebec? Did the killing of fourteen young women at l’École Polytechnique make us more afraid to insist on a radical feminist analysis?1 There was so much insistence at the time that this was not a brutal and systematic crime against women and against feminism but the work of a lone crazy. We worried about how to respond. Would we be exploiting those women who were killed if we used this attack as an example of how sexist violence works to affect all women and to keep all women afraid? Including those of us working to end it? This very same debate resurfaced following the release of the film Polytechnique.

PARTNERSHIP?

Over the years we have been part of various task forces, participated in round table discussions, and been invited to be “partners” with the state in developing public policies on sexual violence. We gained a certain credibility, but at what cost? We were presented with proposals and documents that were already written. We had no genuine power to change more than a few sentences. The representatives of the state would get to have our names on the policy for their political benefit.

What does it mean for a women’s anti-rape centre to work in partnership with the police, Crown prosecutors, and hospital-based ser-

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1 The twentieth anniversary of the Montreal Massacre at l’École Polytechnique in 2009 saw many Quebec feminists discussing the impact of this event on the feminist movement in Quebec.
vices? As one officer explained to me, seeing as we were all on the same side, our job was to explain the way the legal system worked to the victims. Any dissatisfaction or criticisms would then be buffered and filtered through us. We then had to explain that, no, that was not our job. Our job was to ensure that women’s rights were respected and that we would be questioning the barriers to justice alongside the women who were raped. We would be defending women’s rights, not the justice system. This did not go over well.

We worked hard to debunk some of the myths around rape — many of them were embedded in law. One of the most prominent myths was the need for corroborative evidence because, of course, “women lie about rape.” In these days of special “rape squads,” TV shows like “Lie to Me” and “The Mentalist,” as well as attempts at “victim profiling,” this myth, is alive and well. Racist profiling is also a part of this myth for we often hear that certain immigrant groups, cultural communities, or Aboriginal communities are more violent towards women and that is why women are reluctant to come forward. Again there is a failure of the institutional actors to recognize the existence of systemic discrimination, and a preference to locate the problems outside of themselves. This is the only crime where a woman has to prove that she is the “victim” and not the criminal. Clearly the law does not protect women from rape.

INTERNAL (NON)POLITICAL CHOICES

For all the times we stood up to the representatives of the justice system, there were the times when we lost, were too disheartened to act, when my eyes, for example, would glaze over as I sat through yet another meeting while the “partners” discussed what size speculum should be included in the rape kit. Was no one else squirming in their seat over that? Or how the new specialized rape squad officers can tell when women are lying — apparently two-thirds. Why was there silence around the table from the women’s groups? What insidious form of internalized patriarchy was at play? Did we get used to the discriminatory remarks? Did other women not hear them? Did the personal relationships we developed with the people we met each month over a period of several years make us reluctant to challenge them? Were we afraid of losing the credibility we had fought so hard gain? Were we afraid that if we criticized the police they wouldn’t help us with the cases of indi-

individual women who filed charges? Did we not want to listen to one more prosecutor ask us just who we thought we were to be questioning their strategies? Were we afraid to risk a fight because we thought we would lose?

Are we operating in solidarity with the other progressive social movements of the times? In many centres we are forgetting to make the links with anti-oppression theory and practice. In questioning our methods and their accessibility to women of diverse origins, we have noted that the type of inclusion that has happened over the past few years is more about providing services than about sharing of power. While there has been some advancement, most women’s groups and coalitions are still struggling to adapt their practice and structures to make a real place at the table, particularly for immigrant and refugee women, racialized women, and Aboriginal women. The understanding of the intersections between oppressions and how they affect our choices for action and priorities is weak. Fighting systemic racism is a priority for women of colour and the issue of racial profiling is a feminist issue. Nowhere is this more evident than in current police practices of “victim profiling” in sexual assault cases, which also involves racial profiling, the labelling of immigrant and Aboriginal women as less cooperative and thus less worthy of attention, rather than identifying the problems as systemic, sexist, and racist.

In 2008 as I was sorting through the hundreds of emails in my inbox upon my return from a few weeks off, I came across an invitation to a conference on “sexual aggression” organized by a health and social services agency on the south shore of Montreal. The presenters included social work professors, hospital-based professionals, criminologists, psychologists, psychoanalysts, a victims’ rights group, Justice Department victims’ aid services, crown prosecutors, police officers, youth protection … the list goes on. Where were the voices of women? The feminist-run rape crisis centres? Who holds authority on the analysis of violence against women? It isn’t even called violence against women anymore. An entire industry of professionals exists in a network, which involves millions of dollars and attempts to appear to offer a serious state response to sexual violence. Did we create this? Is this what we meant when we denounced the discrimination facing raped women in the criminal justice system? In the meantime, rape continues unabated.

3 « Libérez les mots » Forum Agressions sexuelles, 1 octobre 2008, Agence de la santé et des services sociaux de la Montérégie.
WHERE HAS ALL THE ANGER GONE?

HAVE WE ABDICATED AUTHORITY AND OUR RESPONSIBILITY?
Over the last five-to-ten years our centre has been asking some tough questions. Are we service providers or are we watchdog organizations? Has the need to respond to the distress of individual women overtaken our focus on the effect of rape on women’s equality rights? Are we prepared to occupy public space on the issues around sexual violence? What strategies are we using to engage the state in debate or to raise awareness and reach out to the women who are most marginalized?

As we worked with a refugee woman requesting asylum in Quebec due to the rape and continued death threats she experienced from armed militia in her country of origin, we began to think about a demonstration to call public attention to her situation. The first thought that came to mind as we were brainstorming possibilities was “who will come?” And I wondered, where has all the anger gone? What happened to our capacity to mobilize a public response? In Quebec there are over thirty rape crisis centres, eighty-three battered women’s shelters, and 104 women’s centres. In Montreal alone there are dozens of women’s groups and yet I cannot count on more than a couple of dozen women at any given action.

Where do we go from here? One of the first discussions we needed to have involved deciding what the role of an anti-rape centre was in today’s political climate. Are we a service provider or are we responsible for bringing greater public awareness to the continued shortcomings of the justice system and in public policy surrounding rape?

This is not a new discussion; in the late seventies, feminists were having this debate. Some of the arguments around focusing on service provision are still valid today. Many women are seeking a safe space to talk about their experiences of rape and incest. There are almost no services provided by the state for women who were raped in the past. For some women, the consequences of systematic childhood assaults have created a context where they find themselves marginalized and dealing with poverty, mental health problems, loneliness, and isolation. For recent assaults, women are still finding it difficult to be believed and respected unless they have a “textbook” case.

On the other hand, who is watching to ensure that the legal system is respecting the rights of women during rape trials? Who is raising the alarm, denouncing the discrimination, or informing the public about

4 Online: <http://www.fede.qc.ca/>; online: <http://www.maisons-femmes.qc.ca/index.html>.
5 Online: <http://www.rcentres.qc.ca/qui.html>.
the treatment the state provides in response to sexual violence? Who is reminding commissioners and lawyers for refugees that Canada recognizes rape as a war crime and as sufficient justification for being granted asylum in Canada? Who is witnessing the hearings? Who will accompany the women and stand beside them? If we do not do this, who will?

TURNING AND RETURNING
At Mouvement contre le viol et l’inceste (MCVI) we continue our frontline work with immigrant, refugee, and racialized women who have experienced sexual assault. At the same time, we use these hands-on experiences as a catalyst for change, both internal and external. Along with an ongoing analysis of our own internal structure, we continue to discuss, to question, and to evolve the focus of our efforts.

QUESTIONING: GENTLE STIRRINGS OR TSUNAMI?
About ten years ago, we began to ask ourselves whether the diversity of Montreal was reflected in our staff, our collective members, and the women accessing our services. We realized that we were not reaching immigrant, refugee, and racialized women and that we had no formalized imperative to do so. While there was an unwritten agreement that an urban centre like Montreal should be reaching a wide spectrum of women, this belief was not part of our structural documents or mission statement, nor was it mentioned in our annual action plans. It was understood to be included in the work that we were already doing in the field of sexual violence against women. When we brought the matter to the Quebec coalition, the Regroupement Quebecois des centres d’aide et de lutte contre les aggressions à caractère sexuel (RQCALACS), we met with a similar response. “These women were already included” and did not need specific targeting. The problem, as defined by many member centres, was “that they weren’t coming to our centres.”

From the perspective of our centre, this reaction put the responsibility for inclusivity outside of the centres and onto immigrant and refugee women. This notion that marginalized women who experience additional forms of oppression are already included in our work came up again and again. Colonialist responses such as this are part of an ongoing struggle where the majority group in power defines the standard and anyone else who is “other” is expected to conform to the “common” practice.6

6 See Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of women as “other” in The Second Sex, translated
Until there is a critical mass of representation from racialized women, immigrant women, First Nations, lesbian, and disabled women, among others, there will be no significant paradigm shift. If the changes that do occur remain at the theoretical level and do not translate into the shifting of power dynamics in the daily workings of women's groups and among coalition staff, the priorities will continue to be defined by the majority voice in power and the demands of marginalized women for structural and strategic changes in the violence against women sector will continue to be viewed as non-essential to the work.

**OUR INTERNAL STRUCTURES AND STRATEGIES**

Once we admitted that the problem was mostly with ourselves, we began to ask the questions that needed to be addressed in order to apply ourselves to the task of redirecting our efforts. We applied for and obtained a small grant that allowed us to hire a new staff member to assist our centre in developing and adopting the changes that would truly make us a place for women of diverse origins. We hired a feminist from an immigrant community as a first gesture of solidarity. (We already had some immigrant women on staff and as part of our collective.) We knew that it was important that this work become an integrated part of the centre and not a “special project” that ends when the funding runs out. In order to do this we knew that we all had to be doing some work, not just the new staff person.

We needed to make a commitment to changing the centre. Each of us had to be prepared to question individual ideas, practices, and presumptions as well as the programs that we had in place. Initially this was a painful process. Sometimes it is easier to create something new than to change the habits of a mature group with over thirty years of experience. The project for integrating racialized women became a scapegoat for other structural problems. Rather than using new proposals as an opportunity to update and create innovative ways of engaging in the work, suggestions for change were seen as “adding to an already heavy workload,” “not a priority,” or as “requesting particular privilege for one group of women over another.”

Resistance was encountered both within our own centre and at the RQCALACS coalition level. Many women across Quebec had particu-

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lar difficulty in accepting the idea that there are substantive inequalities among us. The inclusion of an anti-racist, anti-oppression commitment in our work and our language was seen to be outside of our sphere of activity. The fear was that we were spreading ourselves too thin and operating outside of an “antiviolence against women” framework.

In Quebec, many women came into feminism through the lens of Quebec nationalism and the “quiet revolution” of the 1960s. This period was instrumental in freeing women from the stronghold of the Catholic Church and closely interwoven with the political battle of francophone Quebecers to have equal access to power structures and institutions. The demand for protection of French language and culture occurred simultaneously with the rise of feminism. The intersection between two oppressions, English colonization of Quebec and sexism, forms the identity of many Quebec feminists as members of a doubly oppressed group. Has this experience contributed to impeding the anti-violence coalition, RQCALACS, from making a political commitment to moving forward with concrete actions to be more inclusive of racialized women? How much of the resistance is due to years of pressure from state sources to depoliticize our work, to operate in gender neutral terms, and to remove the advocacy aspect of the work in favour of a service provider model?

After several years of discussions and debates, agreement was reached to include mention of disadvantaged groups in the language of some of the structural documents and yearly action plans of the coalition as well as agreement from each centre to do some inclusivity work. This commitment remains uneven and has been the cause of considerable division within the RQCALACS.

**TRANSLATING THEORY INTO ACTION**

The challenge was to create the change we envisioned: change in practices, change in attitudes, and change in the power structure. Initially, at the MCVI centre, we began to adapt some of our work by meeting

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8 Révolution tranquille,” a period of rapid social change during the 1960s in Quebec.
with advocacy groups working with immigrants and refugees, and creating a network and resource guide of groups and services for women from various cultural communities. We achieved a certain level of success in that immigrant and refugee women began calling us.

What we could not predict was that many of the women we spoke with were requesting asylum from Canada due to sexual violence that occurred in their country of origin. We did not expect to receive so many calls from this cohort. Realizing that there was a lack of support for women in this situation, we quickly began to educate ourselves and to seek training in order to support and accompany women to immigration board hearings. They often needed referrals to other forms of community support for housing, employment, food, and clothing. The boundaries of our interventions expanded, and our understanding of the social context that creates an atmosphere ripe for exploitation was deepened. It became clear to us that many immigrant and refugee women were raped by men who saw the status of these women as an opportunity to further abuse their sense of entitlement and power.

One example of how sexist violence against women and racism intersect surfaced repeatedly when we spoke with representatives of the police. The comments that we received amounted to racial profiling of women who report crimes of sexual assault.

**What they said:** “That’s just the way it is in some cultures,” or “Are you sure she won’t back out due to pressure from others in her cultural community?”

**What this meant for women:** A police culture where racist stereotypes such as “sexual assault is considered normal in some cultures” prevails. The result is systemic discrimination and reduced access to justice for immigrant, refugee, and racialized women.

Despite the horrific atrocities experienced by many of the marginalized women that we speak with, we continue to be inspired by their strong will and quiet determination to move forward with their life projects despite all the obstacles they have encountered. It has re- sparked our anger and our determination to find better ways to challenge the banalization of sexual violence endemic to the current state response to the issue. Of greater concern is finding ways to prevent these attitudes from creeping into the anti-violence women’s movement.

Too many of us continue to get lost in the overwhelming task of

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providing services to help individual women cope with the distress caused by their experiences of sexual assault, without the advocacy piece. Some of us drop the advocacy piece for the funding; some of us do it for legitimacy, credibility, and recognition; some of us do it because, as women, we feel powerless to confront a system that does not allow for the reality of women’s lived experiences, a system that, at its most humane, provides for a medical model response while women continue to be raped, murdered, assaulted, and exploited. We end up contributing, in spite of ourselves, to the maintenance of the status quo.

What our centre in Montreal has been trying to do over the last few years is to understand why, despite our colossal collective efforts, systemic discrimination still infects the criminal justice system and our collective experience of sexual violence. We have rewritten our mission statement and are adjusting our internal structures, our actions, and our priorities to reflect the concerns raised in this paper. I have tried to distill them here.

This paper and these questions are a challenge to all of us working in the feminist movement and an opportunity to engage in friendly discussion and dialogue about where we need to readjust our focus and strategies. They are posed with the utmost respect, admiration, and affection for all the women who have dedicated years of extremely difficult work on the front lines to improving our collective lot.

I would like to close with a quote that always me reminds of how I need to approach the work. It is by Australian Aboriginal Dreamkeeper, Lilla Watson: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time…. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”12

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