

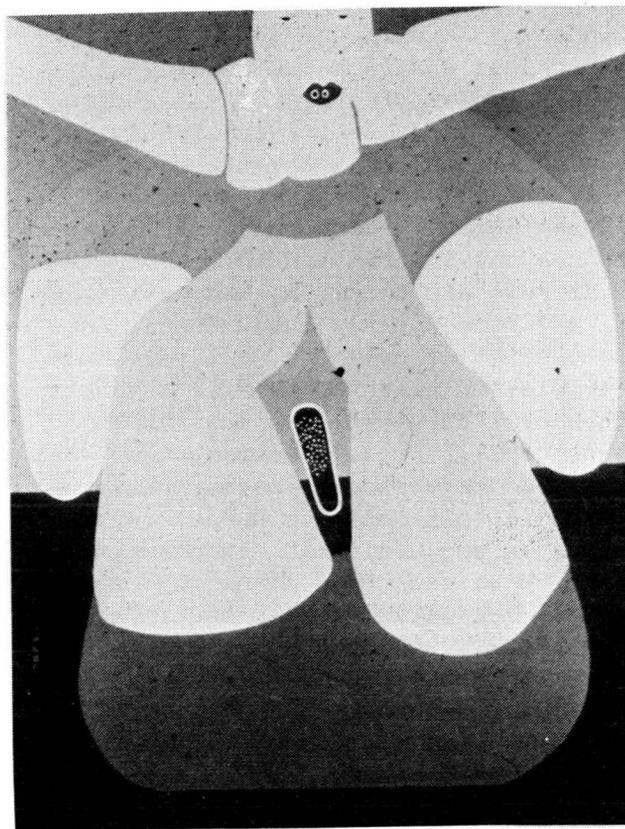
# The Experience of Rape Crisis Centres

*orientation, ces agences ont limité leurs mandats au secteur des services de ces centres et elles utilisent des contrôles monétaires afin de restreindre l'action politique non partisane qui vise la restructuration complète de la société pour mettre fin à la violence dirigée contre les femmes.*

by Joanie Vance

## ABSTRACT/RESUME

*Les centres d'aide aux victimes de viol sont reconnus comme des services sociaux à orientation féminine qui servent de véhicules de changement social. Ils sont la réponse concrète aux besoins articulés par des femmes informées ou conscientisées. Ces centres ont réussi simultanément à aider les victimes et à permettre aux employées de connaître une croissance personnelle. Il en résulte une orientation grandissante vers l'action politique, orientation que les agences de subvention regardent d'un mauvais oeil. Dans le but de minimiser l'influence de cette*



Sharron Corne, *DOUBLE RAPE*, 1975, acrylic on canvas (32" x48")

*Afin de contrecarrer les mesures des agences de subvention et de poursuivre l'expérience de la croissance personnelle/politique, nous suggérons la création d'un front commun de groupes féminins pour l'action politique, tel le lobbying. La mise sur pied d'un éventail de services pour les femmes a créé non seulement la diversité mais aussi la discorde. Il est temps de reprendre conscience de nos intérêts communs et de se rappeler que l'union fait la force.*

Although rape crisis centres are a relatively new phenomenon, many already are acquainted with their dual role as a woman-oriented alternate social service and as a vehicle for social change. The formation of rape crisis centres was a logical development in the progression characterizing the women's movement. The creation of consciousness-raising groups in the late sixties and early seventies began the process of discovery and articulation of common conditions and common problems. Subsequently, we moved on to the construction of our own solutions; to problems confronting women as oppressed members of society. This was a very necessary step in developing a feminist consciousness, for in translating our thoughts into action, we became even more aware of the pervasiveness of our common oppression in all of its manifestations. Speakouts revealed the stigmatization of rape and the silence that masked the extent

of woman-directed violence. But in opening rape crisis centres and establishing liaisons with community services, we also encountered individuals, departments and agencies who suppressed the problem and its root causes by denying its very existence. Thus, even working for the initial acceptance of our service component was a difficult and revealing experience.

Originally, women responded to the vacuum in services for rape victims by establishing rape crisis centres to meet those victims' various needs. Our intent was three-fold. First, we wanted to ferret out the few established resources within the hospitals, police, legal system and counselling or social service agencies, in order to compile a list of dependable and sympathetic referrals. Secondly, we wanted to bring pressure to bear on those same categories of agencies that in theory had a mandate to serve victims but were not fulfilling this role so as to (diplomatically, of course) force them to provide those services. And thirdly, we wanted to provide parallel service to ensure that an empathetic and caring woman was available to support the victim throughout the immediate crisis. The caseworker also helped to smooth the way for the sometimes grudgingly provided or disorganized services. The basic premise was and remains that a victim of a crime deserves to have treatment and services provided by the society of which she is part.

Once the provision of services was established, we turned to a more fundamental and much less tangible goal-- that of complete reculturalization. We defied and disproved the myths surrounding rape, and constructed our own theory of why this and other violent crimes against women exist in our society. We discovered that rape was an excellent issue to use in raising the awareness of the public. Although we encountered many people who did not believe that the majority of "alleged" rape victims had truly been forced, rape was nonetheless a crime that people agreed (if even for the wrong reasons) was most despicable. At the bottom line, no one liked rape, and everyone thought it should stop. It was more difficult to present the parallels between rape and the general treatment of women in society but even here we made inroads and gathered forces behind us. So-called "normal" women, especially, were able from their personal experience to see the pervasiveness of our rape culture, which we came to identify in the wider context of a culture that condones and even promotes violence against women. Certainly our public education programs had a positive effect and took us to a certain point in altering our social fabric, if not structure.

As we dealt with increasing numbers of women, we also realized that our experience benefited us individually and as a group. We gained expertise in

organizing techniques, we saw our political theorizing demonstrated in individual case histories and we learned to work together in a woman-oriented and woman-identified milieu. These tangential benefits were invaluable and still serve us well. In keeping with our goal of replacing traditional gender-determined power relationships with non-sex-specific egalitarianism, many rape crisis centres chose to operate with horizontal rather than vertical hierarchies. This included the concepts of collectivism and consensus. Since vertical power structures had historically placed women on the bottom rung, we chose a paradigm that encouraged all women to discuss problems and participate in the decision-making process. This mode of operation may have been more difficult to enact but as a learning process and a trust-building mechanism its benefits far out-weighed the problems of realigning our orientation. As rape crisis centres became organized and operative, we saw our system of service delivery evolve into more than a straight dispensation of information and support. We realized that our method of providing service actually paralleled our structure in being a political process; and as a corollary, we concluded that our service could not be eventually transferred to established social services. Insofar as we believed that there were basic services that ought to be provided for victims and, additionally, that

the frame of reference from which they were offered had to be feminist, it remained that rape crisis centres were the means to this provision. The manner in which services were provided had to be feminist because this permitted the woman, once she had moved beyond the initial crisis stage, to perceive her assault as a manifestation of our cultural structure rather than as an isolated attack to which she personally had somehow contributed.

First, the woman turned her guilt and humiliation outwards and focused it as anger towards her assailant, although this was only a cathartic process which did not alter the fact that the man had been culturally conditioned to rape. However, by making the personal political, the woman could remove the responsibility for the assault from herself, or even from the assailant, and place it squarely where it belonged--on our society and the traditional political theory which forms its foundation. If she wished, she could join those of us trying to do something about it, or she could deposit the assault in her memory and move beyond it.

This short explanation of a feminist provision of services is in no way intended to insinuate that we proselytized--we only attempted to restore control to the woman through the presentation of alternatives from which she could choose. This served

to prevent her from assuming responsibility for her assault, which was an insidious effect of trying to deal with a rape alone while using our society as a frame of reference. Quite often the extent of our feminist modus operandi was to present ourselves as role models--women who were capable of dealing with a crisis, even if it was not our own crisis. This could be considered passive feminism but it was very important and could not ever be entrusted to traditional social services. Creating rape experts in institutions neither restored control to victims nor addressed the root causes of rape. Thus, we reached the present point of development--with a decision to compel the government at all levels to construct a policy of funding the service aspect of rape crisis centres and to recognize and respect our mode of operation.

Women in rape crisis centres have worked arduously to place their centres on a firm footing and to gain popular acceptance. As we have become established, the government has slowly started to award us grants. I would like to move from discussing the experience of rape crisis centres to an examination of potential future paths. While new centres are continually opening and beginning the previously outlined sequence, increasingly women who have progressed to the present stage of development are beginning to examine the rationale behind and implications of government funding. Cer-

tainly we want monetary support in order to continue operating rape crisis centres, but we do not want funding strictures to impede our attempts to alter our political structure. We see change rather than the addition of yet another social service as our goal.

Government funding has several implications. The more obvious ones are the enhancement of their own image, giving rape crisis centres "credibility" in the eyes of the public and providing us with the means of operational stability. But also, whether by accident or through insidious intent, funding can be used as a means of control. There is no correct solution to dealing with problems of monetary control--we are faced with an approach-avoidance situation. But a careful analysis of our goals may provide us with alternative methods of attaining them which may be more viable than the consequences of blindly forging ahead. At the same time, we can discern and circumvent attempts to subvert our less acceptable efforts by government funding agencies who have their own hidden agendas.

Token funding by the government gives a powerful implicit ideological message: that "the government cares." By funding rape crisis centres, the government obtains credibility in women's eyes by allegedly showing its concern for women's problems. But actually, we realize that the government would

cut off funding for political activity attempting to resolve those problems by changing the structure of our society--one, I might add, where the rapist and victim mentalities permeate respectively male and female conditioning. A rather evident but often sublimated point is this: the government wants to maintain the status quo, with its smooth capitalistic progression. Therefore, the government will not fund organizations oriented towards radical change. Rape crisis centres, in demanding that women be treated as equal members of society, are implicated in a much more pervasive societal reformation. Consequently, the government will only fund the band-aid service and public "education" components of rape crisis centres and not those activities that might eventually have devastating ramifications on the present state of affairs. It is mandatory to remember that the government is only prepared to fund certain kinds of citizens' participatory activities, those being the appendages to the existing social service delivery system.

While not involving a direct removal of funds, the extreme restrictions placed on political action by registered charitable (meaning non-profit) organizations demonstrates one type of control exerted by the government to prevent organized movements from working for change of our laws or of that same government. The uproar following

the release of the guidelines forced their recall, but the intent of the government was appallingly clear. Thus, even now we are experiencing co-optation, through limits placed on permissible non-service actions in order to receive funds for even our most Florence Nightingalesque activities. To ensure a constant watch over rape crisis centres, centres have been forced to recruit uninterested but socially prominent community pillars on Boards of Directors, in order to qualify for funding. This Board serves as a check on activity counter to government criteria, although the government views it only as the maintenance of a carefully managed "democracy."

Other consequences of government funding have also become apparent. Rather than recognizing that rape crisis centres provide a mandatory social service which has previously and improperly been overlooked, the federal and provincial governments view the centres in a much more benevolently paternalistic manner. The lack of an intelligent and considered analysis of rape crisis centres and their raison d'être by the government has resulted in the lack of any coherent funding policy. This mentality has been further demonstrated by the type of grants given to rape crisis centres, specifically, short-term and project-oriented. Rape crisis centres have only infrequently received operational

funding; generally the federal government has given money for specific and secondary projects such as constructing a bibliography or organizing a "public awareness" day, and provincial governments, with the exception of British Columbia and Saskatchewan, have ignored us altogether. This has caused centre workers to be sidetracked into fulfilling project requisites, all the while trying to run the centre around the project schedule. Not only has this been inefficient but it has meant that we have done twice the work for the same price. As well, energy has been used to account for the money in order to survive government scrutiny and maintain the project. The government likes to see neat projects that have a start, a finish and a report, but this has resulted in us racking our brains for new ideas, instead of getting on with day-to-day business. The sporadic and casual nature of granting short-term allocations has also meant hours of extra work spent in rationalizing renewal or in reapplying with still other proposals. In addition, once we have reached our quota in these "make-work" projects, we have been denied additional funds. The closure of the Waterloo Rape Crisis Centre stands as a harbinger; the women running it were denied funding at all government levels because they had "received their share."

While the government may have either

no or merely haphazard policy on funding rape crisis centres, it most certainly does have a policy of self-perpetuation. This is the point where the anti-rape movement and the government part ways. If we are to alter the society whose foundation rests upon the concept of women as a form of property rather than as potential owners of property, we must differentiate that component from the service aspect of rape crisis centre function. You recall that earlier I mentioned that rape crisis centre public education programs have had a positive effect and have taken us to a certain point in altering our social fabric, if not structure. I am not sure how far our re-education programs can go because, ultimately, they are superficial. We are not dealing with the root causes of rape. We all know that men rape because they have deep-seated feelings of anger, hostility and powerlessness. But why do they choose sexual violence as an outlet and why is it focused on women? It is crucial for anti-rape groups not to focus on rape to the exclusion of developing a broader analysis of society. Feminist political analysis provides an explanation. Lorenne Clark, author of Rape, the Price of Coercive Sexuality, writes:

It now seems to me certain that politics, the theory on which it is based, and the practice and practices arising out of it, including of course law and legal theory, articulates an ideology of

male supremacy. Politics is the ideology of male supremacy.(1)

While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to elaborate on the syllogism, I think that the foundation of all political thought rests on the concept of male dominance and a "natural" male right to own and control women. Since gender provides the dividing line, and since sexual ownership connotes unlimited sexual access, it follows that men will use their sex as a means of expressing domination and their focus will be on women. Furthermore, this unequal distribution of power extends far beyond rape to a pervasive misogyny which is the logical result of the contempt with which women in their powerlessness are perceived. Resocialization must ultimately extend beyond education to a reformulation of our basic political structure.

Now, it is rather problematic to reject our cultural genesis and to start off once again--I think the pragmatist in most of us overrides the revolutionary. But the points on which I have elaborated comprise a number of different ways rape crisis centres have developed to rectify our social inequity, and we must keep all of them in mind rather than focusing only on the more obvious components of service delivery and public education. And although it is important to be aware of government strategies, poli-

cies and even total unconcern, we must at the same time monitor our shift from internally determined goals to the external control of funding agents, and the fact that we may become increasingly compromised unless we guard against it, and move to prevent it. Some of our goals are acceptable to the government--for example, crisis intervention--and some are not--most notably, the alteration of our male-owned and operated political structure. But we cannot permit government funding of the former to act as a lever to block the latter.

The government, quite understandably, will cut off all funding if the money is being used in ways that bureaucrats consider to be subversive. Or, if we focus to too great an extent on a need for funding of rape crisis centres, the government will use funding as a means of constraining political work. If we permit the government to control our direction through adherence to its funding policies, then we are permitting our own co-optation to occur. We have

difficult choices to make. We can certainly try to function without funds, and thus prevent even the threat, let alone the actuality of government co-optation. Or, we can move on from this point of development in a way that is to our advantage. Although rape is a clear-cut rallying point, it can also serve to isolate us from the central theme which ties our respective issues together. Perhaps in the same manner that we used consciousness-raising sessions as a springboard to the conception and development of rape crisis centres, we can now, at a certain stage of growth, use what we have learned in rape crisis centres as a springboard to return to the mainstream of the political renaissance. As long as we clearly perceive rape crisis centres as a process rather than as static social service appendages, we can integrate government money with our principles and still adhere to our goals without co-optation. And as a stage in our personal growth, we can learn from being part of a centre--receive as well as give--and then use this knowledge to join the larger fight.

#### NOTES

1. Lorene Clark, "Politics and Law: The Theory and Practise of the Ideology of Male Supremacy; or, it wasn't God who mad Honky Tonk Angels," in D.M. Weistub (ed.), Law and Policy (Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, 1976), pp. 1-2.