

THE ANGER OF WOMEN

BY VICKIE SWANSON GARMO

"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.

~MURIEL RUKEYSER

I want to address the anger of women, all of whom are involuntary inductees at birth into the oldest and longest of wars, that waged around the issue of sexism. It is an undeclared war. As in all wars there is no real winner; there is only a victor who must constantly guard himself and his position by continuous aggression on the various fronts and behind the lines. It is a many thousand years war, a global war — both a cold and a hot war.

Many would like to think of this war as mainly a cold one, utilizing oppression through discrimination in social and economic forms (which often have violent effects). However, the victims — women — receive the message from the time they are small people that it is an actively physically violent war being waged upon them. They are made aware early of the guerrillas in the streets who, if they are not careful, will snatch them away and mutilate, torture, maim or kill them.

Beware the child molester! But how many girls are shocked to find there is an enemy who dwells within the confines of their protected environments, camouflaged behind the titles of *father, uncle or family friend*? And how many young women are raised in homes where they see their model of adulthood, the mother, being physically abused by her husband? These girls know it is a hot war. Those not directly exposed to violence in their youth, perhaps brainwashed to believe themselves immune to involvement in the violent frontlines of this battle, amazingly find themselves put there in a relationship with a man as adults.

Upon reaching adulthood all women realize the control of their bodies, their reproductive systems, is not determined by them. Many are subjected to unnecessary surgery, forced sterilization, forced pregnancy or continuation of pregnancy. Who has this power over women's bodies? The religious, governmental and medical institutions of the society in which they live. And these institutions are controlled by creatures with very unlike bodies, people who cannot begin to relate to such a reproductive system.

Women are angry. Women who have been forced into the position of being on the frontlines in the battle in the war of sexism have added reason for their anger. They, as frontline victims in any war, have scarred and mutilated bodies, have experienced the isolation and lack of support, the hostility of their society towards such an experience. Their eyes are especially opened in regards to the war and to the facts and



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effects concerning it. Their anger and fear is stirred every day as they hear about, read about or see women who are victims of rape and battering. They are horrified at the destruction of women's bodies and women's minds and spirits which is notable everywhere; and they are most angered to discover the lack of power and control they have to change the situation.

Those women who cannot overcome their passive conditioning, who accept their impotence and victimization outwardly through lack of a knowledgeable choice, take it as a personal defeat. They feel helpless, sterile. They often channel their anger towards themselves. Depression, the women's disease; depression — anger turned inward. Valium. Liquor. Drugs. The victimization process continues.

Fortunately many of us, whether or not exposed directly to the violence and destruction of this war, have gained a lot of knowledge about and insight into the condition. We do not love the institutions and people responsible for our victimization. We do not take on the oppressive roles of those in power and use them to oppress others. We do not want to see aggression of

people upon other people rewarded. We do not identify with, and refuse to participate in, the perpetuation of this senseless violence. Instead we try to teach others to recognize the tactics, both subtle and blatant, and the realities of this deadly situation.

Tolstoy wrote that women have a universal acceptance and understanding of death that men only try to learn. We cannot feel sorry for men who have lost their innocent way of looking at life as if people were immortal as some war veterans have lost. We have always known our mortality and that of our children. We are not sorry that we are sensitive human beings, and that we can identify with others who are victims. How else can we help eliminate the category of victim?

We as women did not choose this war in which we are illegitimately involved. We would not choose any war. Instinctively we know that any destruction of human beings is a challenge to the survival of us all.

Until those who are commonly being declared and promised the position of winner on the battlefields against other individuals become aware there are no winners in struggles between people but only in struggles in which all people enter against our common age-old enemies of disease and famine; until there are no medals, no praise for any type of violence done to anyone; until the concept of being a man includes the ability to be knowledgeable, sensitive and understanding of the human condition past and present — until then destructive feats of violence, abuse and oppression of people will not cease.

Those who have been active, aggressive contributors to war must not perpetuate it by continuing it wherever they happen to be. The oldest and most basic war between people must be ended. If it is not there will soon be the war during which it will be unquestionably proven that there are no winners, no heroes. There will be no more killing for the glory of God or government, or for the honor of manhood, There will be nobody left to kill.

Therein lies the anger of women.

Vickie Swanson Garmo is a former resident of Astoria and an early volunteer for the Clatsop County Crisis Service. She wrote this article for the June 1986 NCTE.

BEATING HER UP

The woman had been beaten by her husband. He raped her also, then tore up the house. Now he was in jail and she was afraid of what he would do to her when he was released. She called the Clatsop County Women's Crisis Service in Astoria.

She was told that a man had no legal right to hurt his wife and that she could press charges against him. There were other problems. Her husband's parents had the children and refused to give them up to her. She was also addicted to Valium. That night she called the Crisis Service a second time and asked if anyone would take her to a hospital. She had attempted suicide with an overdose of Valium preceded by heavy drinking of alcohol. She was afraid her husband would kill her if she attempted to keep him in jail, she told the woman from the Crisis Service who drove her to the emergency room. The woman from the Crisis Service said she would accompany her to the police station. She said it was important to fight back against her husband's brutality. She knew first-hand about domestic violence, the Crisis Service woman said; she had herself been a battered wife.

Most of the women who volunteer for the Crisis Service have been victims of domestic violence. Like a majority of the women they attempt to help, it was initially difficult to break off with the men who beat them. Like the woman who attempted suicide they were afraid of their husbands or lovers. They understand when callers continue to stay with the men who beat them; some have called more than once.

The woman who overdosed on Valium was too frightened to press charges against her husband. After assuring her that she was safe from her husband, the police released him just before she signed a statement that would have kept him in jail. "He was big," the woman from the Crisis Service said. "I shrank in a corner. He looked just like the guy who used to beat me up."

The frightened wife left the police station with her husband. The woman from the Crisis Service thinks he moved her out of town.

A typical case, she said. A woman held hostage, her children the weapon used to imprison her. If she did not break away from the pattern of violence and pain her next attempt at suicide might succeed, or she might die from drug addiction. It was not unlikely that she would be killed by her husband.

The Crisis Service was established in October 1979 to help break the pattern. Most of what the women who volunteer do is provide referral services such as medical and legal help. They also set up sanctuaries when needed. They are often at risk. Some have been threatened by husbands or lovers of women they assist. They are severely criticized by men who are alarmed by the feminist movement and the growing determination of women to protect themselves at a time when the violence against them has increased.

Each call received by the Crisis Service is logged. The information confidential and the daily reports do not identify the callers. Here are some examples picked at random and scrambled somewhat to protect the identities of the victims:

Woman taken to hospital, badly beaten by husband of 5 months.

Battered wife moved out of home and needs shelter where he cannot find her.

Woman needs shelter, harassed by ex-husband.

Bringing children with her.

Woman on the run. Talked fast. Will arrive for shelter in one hour. Afraid of husband.

Niece called. Uncle threatening her aunt.

Husband charged with kidnapping. Tried to take children.

Woman with four kids. Husband beat her severely.

Threatened her and kids with gun. Police called. Took gun and husband. Woman asking for shelter if she decides to leave.

Boyfriend of rape victim asks what he can do to help her. She is withdrawn. Unable to respond physically. He wants some reading material on rape.

Woman married 9 months. Husband an alcoholic. She lost first husband and oldest daughter in a fire several years ago. Younger children ordered to in-laws by court. Current husband shouts at her after drinking every night. She is very nervous. Needs company.

Husband brandished gun at wife and girlfriend. He took kids and left. She wants to file assault charges. Wants names of attorneys.

Woman called in regard to 13 year old daughter who is having problems after short stay with dad, who lives in another city.

Woman says husband's father a drinker and batterer. Woman's boyfriend tried to strangle her. She also has head injuries.

Woman beaten by husband. Put in shelter.

Woman afraid of motorcycle club. Wants shelter.

Woman choked by husband. Held her on bed.

Threatened her with gun.

Woman's husband jealous of her job and friends.

Poured gas all over bedroom, himself and wife. Threatened to burn.

Unemployed husband tries to kill wife. Shot arrows at her. Smothered her. Slapped and beat her.

Boyfriend beats woman. Kicks her out of house. She stays one night in shelter waiting for emergency money from family in another state.

Woman trapped at home in terror for several days.

Husband slaps her, spits and urinates on her. Pulls her hair and threatens to kill her.

Woman forced into sex. Put in shelter.

The list of abuse seems unending. More women are assaulted by men. And the more women attempt to defend themselves the more brutal are the men who assault them. The times do not favor gentleness. The hardening of the nation makes life more dangerous for women.

The women of the Clatsop County Crisis Service struggle along. Often disillusioned. Often in despair.

The calls come in.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER
(NORTH COAST TIMES EAGLE, 1980)



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