



Women take back the night

by Joyce Lombardi

One night of protest won't lessen sexual violence against women. But this didn't stop the more than 300 or so women who took to the streets September 16 in the annual Take Back the Night (Femmes Sans Peur) march.

Solidarity was the theme of the candlelight procession of women marching, chanting, singing and screaming down Rue Saint-Denis. Most onlookers voiced their support, and a few left the sidewalks to join the crowd.

"Of course there's no immediate impact," said Elaine Sher, President of the Coalition of Women of Montréal, and one of the march's organizers, "But the point of the march is to bring public awareness [of the issue of violence against women] and to have a night for women to unite. This is our night."

"This is one of the few times we can walk the streets without fear," said Gail Monroe, a participant in the march. Her friend Laura said, "We're tired of violence against us on the streets, at home, everywhere."

According to Sher, "Although the candlelight march is visually beautiful, the march is about protest, not pro-victim, martyred silence."

Shauna, a marshall from the Concordia Women's Collective, said she's been "saving up rage for a week" to let it out at the march and at the women-only Victory Dance afterwards. "It's a safe place for women to scream," she said.

Participants felt it was important that the march be for women only. The few men participating were asked to march in the back, and women volunteered to be marshalls so the marchers would not have to be directed by the all male police escort.

Elaine Sher feels no remorse even though some men complained. "This is a night for women by women," she said.

The event was organized by three women, Sher, Mary Lamey, and Leona Heilig, all of the Coalition of Women of Montréal, along with about thirty other volunteers. The march is financially self-sufficient, with food and beverage revenues from the Victory Dance covering expenses, and providing a cushion that makes each following year easier to organize.

But Sher, as well as several other marchers, are discouraged by the dwindling numbers and the lack of a wider representation of women's groups. Although the organizers have tried to expand the march by contacting women's

shelters and various minority groups, the response has not been favorable and the participants continue to be mostly white, middle-class, anglophone university students.

Sher explained the low level of response from other women contacted. "Women in shelters are living this," she said. "They are too close to being victims themselves. Poor women focus on community type issues."

She cited growing apathy among students as the reason for the low turnout. "Women just need to open their eyes to what's happening out there," added Shauna.

"The problem is not the laws, it's the attitudes," said Sher. "As long as women are portrayed the way they are in the media, then people will continue to think that violence against women is acceptable behavior." She added that the march's role in keep the issue of violence "front and center in the community" is reason enough to keep organizing and trying to expand it.

Statistics show that violence against women is getting worse. The Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women's 1981 report shows that from 1969 to 1981 the number of reported rapes increased by 151 percent. The 1985 report stated that a sexual assault occurs every six minutes, and one in every six women will be sexually assaulted by the age of eighteen. As always, these figures are only based on reported assaults, accounting for only about 10 percent of actual incidents.



Photos by
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