

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The 'Ripper murders' broke with the normal pattern of violent killing, for the victims did not know their assailant. They did share one thing with most violent attacks on women — the murders challenged men's historic role of 'protecting women' and terrorised women who, by walking alone, ventured outside men's protection.

Murder, usually, is a most intimate crime. 485 people were killed in England and Wales<sup>1</sup> in 1978, and at least 356 of the victims (73%) knew their killer. In 1979, 571 people were murdered, 266 of them (46.5%) by a member of their family (including lovers.) Only 20% were killed by strangers — a proportion which has leapt up in the last few years.

Despite this increase, the most common violent killings in 1979 were still of spouses (24% of the total). This, a decade ago, would have been followed by the killing of children by their parents (24% of the total in 1960, 12% in 1979.) Which still makes a child's life far more at risk from the violence of a parent than from any sweet-offering stranger. Until the beginning of the decade, murder was almost wholly a family crime, and if these figures included those deaths classified as manslaughter, violent death would be even more preponderantly a crime of intimacy, last year, last decade and probably for centuries.

The true facts of murder and violence are as revealing about society as is the wilful refusal of many to recognise them, and the atmosphere of fear and intimidation that must accompany the common patterns of violence within many personal relationships. It is the bosom of the family which nurtures the most violent, explosive tensions, the strongest impulse, and the greatest opportunity to destroy and hurt. That is no more than a truism — the circle of family and friends is, by definition, the arena of emotional relationships. And it is inescapable emotional tensions of *dependence* that lead most surely to violence. (The family relationship where there is the greatest equality is between brothers and sisters and, significantly, it is accompanied by less serious violence than any other.)

The National Marriage Guidance Council who, presumably, are brought into daily contact with the painful truths of much family life, advised women over the long, hotly closeted Christmas break, to get their husbands to stop drinking and take the dog for a walk instead. They feared an outbreak of violence. Such relations of dependence and inequality are, of course, no more than an intimate reflection of those in society at large. Yet the right wing persist in upholding the unique safety of the family home (the

originator, if not the site, not only of most murders, rapes, violent assaults but also of most accidents) against the lawlessness of the streets and communal meeting grounds. The danger, suggests public mythology, is to the sanctity of home and property from the ravages of the alien, the outsider.

In drawing the anatomy of violence in our society, you will find sexual equality in only one figure — murdered children; 46 boys and 46 girls murdered in 1979 (70 of them by their parents.) Overall, more men than women are murdered (305 males to 266 females last year), an increase in the proportion of men killed since the first half of the 70s (when the average was 189 men to 186 women) and possibly accounted for by the increase in murders by strangers.

There is, it doesn't need saying, no intimation of equality in the sex of those who commit the violence. Of those over 21 brought for trial for murder in 1979, 105 (88%) were men. Of course, murder is so rare a crime that turning this figure of a few hundred inside out to find features of social significance would be pushing it — if murder were the outlandish and 'abnormal' act featured in *The Professionals* or even Agatha Christie. (In fact, throughout the decade, except for the year of peak IRA bombings, death as a result of terrorist acts, escaping the police etc, was so unusual it didn't get counted in the statistical percentages. It came to precisely two deaths in 1979.)

But murder is not separate from the processes of everyday life. Over half are committed in what the police call circumstances of quarrel, revenge or loss of temper (primarily domestic killings). Murder testifies not to the alien world of psychopaths and professional criminals, but to the universal one of fraught personal relationships. And here generalisations between men and women are both valid and necessary.

In the police's special section, 'Serious Violence Between Spouses' 81.5% of those suspected of murder or attempted murder are the husbands. Of 5447 cases of wounding and serious assault between spouses, 93% were women attacked by their husbands. And as Women's Aid Centres have tirelessly pointed out, the number of unreported cases is higher than the number reported.

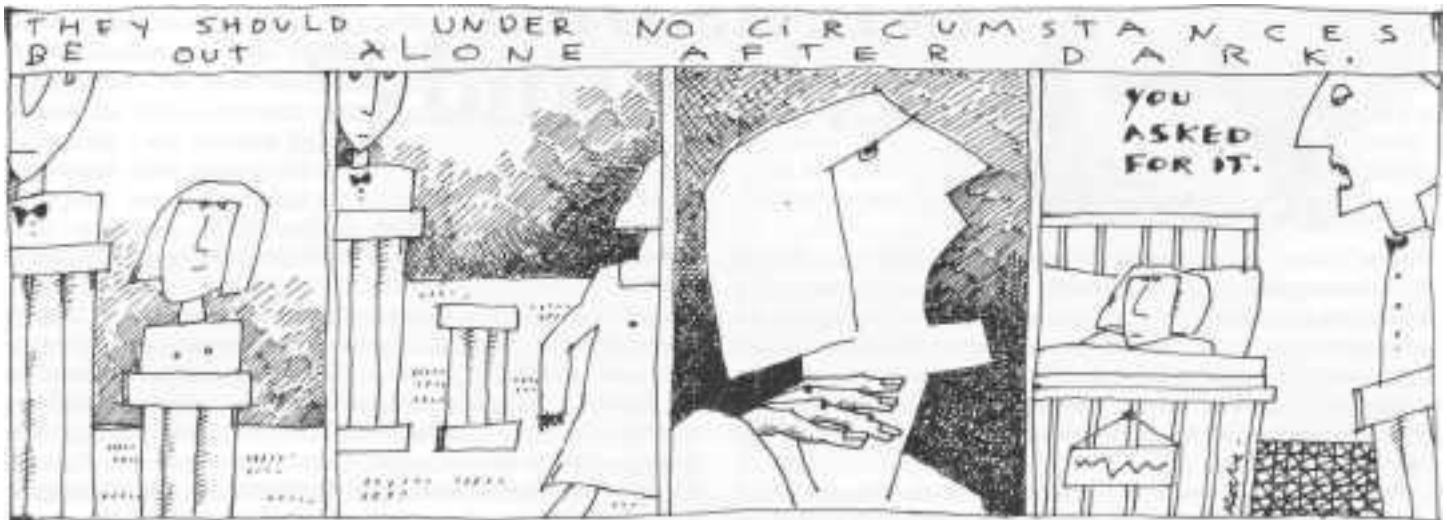
In the weeks following the death of Jacqueline Hill, the 13th 'Ripper murder', many women campaigned to link together three separate phenomena: the 'extraordinary' violence of the Ripper crimes; the normal pattern of domestic violence; and the depiction of violence against women in the cinema in particular. One image ties together those three phenomena in women's experience, and the image is the trademark of

a thousand different film billboards all over the country — the face of a woman in a paroxysm of terror as an unseen man approaches her. The message is the same, from the benevolent authorities who feel they are protectors, from the bullying husbands and fathers who abuse the power they feel is rightfully theirs, and from the enterprises which make financial profits from women's powerlessness; it is that women *ought* to feel afraid. As dictators and torturers found out

Leave aside the assumed complicity between criminal and police chief, a complicity that is fundamental to the world of crime and which makes it, as in this case, so hard for the police to catch anyone who is not part of the normal criminal underworld or a known family member. Leave aside the clear desire for fame (and, from various statements from the local police and civilian police committee, the reluctant admiration for the 'cleverness' and 'ironic sense of humour' of

and murder are essential, there is no doubt that in the process of terrorism, they are linked. For the fear of violence is not primarily a fear of pain (women would never have babies, breastfeed, endure menstruation with so little complaint or spend hours near hot ovens were pain, in itself, terrifying); rather, violence is rightfully perceived to be an attempt to destroy something of the person herself, which is truly terrifying.

Up until recently, the women's liberation



long ago, there is no more powerful an instrument of rule than terror.

Lord Boyle, Vice Chancellor of Leeds University said 'Once again I have been advised to warn all women students that . . . they should under no circumstances be out alone after dark'. When women students sought to defend themselves by carrying 'offensive weapons' the West Yorkshire police said 'Women should eliminate risk by being accompanied whenever possible during darkness'. A woman was prosecuted in London for carrying a spray can of red dye as a defence against assault. And *The Times* made it clear that, if a woman did get murdered, it would be because, like Ripper victim Jayne MacDonald, 'she made the mistake of walking home alone'.

If we see murder as, normally, the final explosion in a pattern of bullying and intimidatory violence, the pattern of the Ripper murders becomes more recognisable. Take, for instance, the notorious quote from the 'Ripper tape' sent in June 1979: 'I have the greatest respect for you, George [Oldfield, heading the 'Ripper inquiry'] but Lord, you are no nearer catching me now than four years ago when I started. I reckon your boys are letting you down George. There's plenty of them [prostitutes] knocking about. They never learn do they George? At the rate I'm going, I should be in the book of records'.

'this Ripper chap'). Look instead at two things. Firstly, the challenge to the police. In a paternalistic society such as ours, men occupy the role of women's 'protectors'. A woman who leaves the 'protectorate' (ie, walks on her own) becomes fair game for any man, and may well be subject to a barrage of sexual advances, insults and abuse. A woman with a man cannot be approached, for that would be a challenge to her protector. Whatever the motives of the 'Ripper murders' and the taped and written messages to the police, the effect was to make a public challenge to the 'professional protectors', the police.

Secondly, the taped reference to prostitutes 'never learning' tells us that whoever taped the message saw the murders as an attempt to intimidate and punish all prostitutes. The distinction made by the 'Ripper message', police, press and, indeed the public, between prostitutes and 'decent' women is, of course, revealing about all of us. Yet, in moving from prostitutes, who had 'never learned' to all women the message was that any woman outside the protectorate could be killed and should be terrorised. (This has, in particular, meant women students, the rape of whom has become such a continuous threat that the NUS has held special conferences, and circulated all college heads with security-improvement suggestions.) Although distinctions between rape

movement has been the only political force to point to the significance of patterns of violence and sexual harassment (also directed towards children and male homosexuals) as a means of organising power relationships. Even where sexual harassment takes place at work (and women suspect that the majority of women have been subject to some sort of sexual harassment and intimidation by male superiors) unions have been reluctant to take it up. Indeed, where two women clerical workers in London did bring a serious accusation against a manager for continuous and intolerable sexual harassment, their union defended the manager, and the women were 'redeployed'. However, at the last Scottish TUC Women's Conference, AUEW-TASS moved an historic motion, calling for 'concerted social action against male violence' and condemning 'the media coverage of such incidents which plays on the fears of women rather than directs the anger of society as a whole to reforming itself.' Who could protest about such a demand? Yet it is in some ways revolutionary, for until 'society' comes to terms with the centrality of the threat of violence and sexual abuse as a means of organising 'its' way of life, the lives of many children, and most homosexuals, old people and women will be coerced in a way that the lives of adult men are not.

<sup>1</sup> All figures refer to England and Wales only.