Chapter Five

Marital Conflict, Emotions, and "De-culturalizing" Violence

A case of marital conflict that came before the counsellors of the Department of Individualized Services at the International Institute of Metropolitan Toronto involved a Greek couple referred by the Ontario Family Court in winter 1968. In keeping with the court's "socialized justice" mandate to investigate and mediate conflict and effect a reconciliation, the court social worker wanted the couple to receive counselling from someone who knew their language and culture. The European female counsellor assigned to them had been the court interpreter during their recent hearing, so she already knew that, one year after arriving in Canada through the family sponsorship system, the wife had laid a claim of non-support against her husband/sponsor. She accused him of squandering his wages, disappearing for long periods at a time, and neglecting the children. The file entries convey her resentment towards the in-laws, with whom she lived, for encouraging him to "treat her badly." The worker's notes on the "long talk" she had with her client about her in-laws "not respect[ing]" her refer to the client by her first name, suggesting that a degree of intimacy had also been quickly established.[1]

In keeping with the pro-family stance of the Institute and the Family Court, and the social welfare state more broadly, the counsellor advised the wife "to be patient" with her husband, who had skipped the session, and work towards reconciliation. Since the woman asked the worker to reform her husband's ways as she did not want to "break her family," the advice also aligned with her wishes, though the counsellor suspected it had more to do with her concern for the children's welfare than her husband's. As for the meddling in-laws, the counsellor urged the woman to try to convince her husband to find separate housing, her imperfect English indicating her own status as an immigrant, albeit that of an educated middle-class urbanite. I "advised" her, she writes, "to try her best to make husband to find an apartment to live out of the parents and brothers and sisters in law." While it reflected a private nuclear family ideal, the advice was, under the circumstances, a reasonable if inadequate strategy; limited finances

and the husband's family ties probably rendered it moot. The counsellor suspected the marital problems were due in part to the class difference between the wife, a former city clerk with a higher-than-average education (among Greek immigrants), and her husband and in-laws, who came from a rural village. So she also advised her client, then employed as a hospital cleaner, to apply for a government-subsidized English and commercial studies course that might lead to a better-paid clerical job. The woman followed the advice and, in a follow-up call several months later, said she was "very happy" with the course and her husband. Shortly afterwards, however, she reported on his backsliding, saying he had quit his job, was again coming home late at night, had disappeared already for a week, and was again being "careless for [the] children." In response, she renewed her claim of non-support.[2]

A major theme illuminated by this case is the emotional suffering the wife endured at the hands of a husband (and in-laws) who lacked any emotional investment in or affection for her or her children. Like the majority of the women featured here, she was not a victim of wife battery, but, like them, she endured much soul-destroying emotional abuse. Ironically, given the era's Canadian stereotypes of the rigidly patriarchal European family, the husband justified his actions on the grounds that Canada had freed him from the community constraints of his homeland. The wife said that, whenever she confronted him about his hurtful behaviour, he countered that in Canada he could do as he wished, cynically invoking "Canadian" ideals of freedom and democracy in defence of a system of gender oppression that crossed class, cultural, religious, and political boundaries. Many of the other husbands featured here similarly sought to reassert their authority over a wife who challenged them. A notable minority of them did so not through verbal and emotional abuse alone, but also by resort to physical violence, one of the means by which, as leading feminist scholar Shahrzad Mojab notes, male power is reproduced in economic and class systems, cultures, and societies around the globe.[3] A handful of men appeared to suffer emotional abuse due to marital conflict.

This chapter explores how Toronto Institute counsellors dealt with cases of marital conflict, highlighting the role of emotions and the impact of female counsellors in the multicultural social welfare encounter.[4] In addition to probing the recorded interactions between counsellors and clients for what they reveal about intimacy and affect, I engage the debates surrounding case file–based research and those regarding a supposed correlation between "foreign" ethnic cultures and male violence against women. With respect to the counsellors, the files under review allow me to explore a central paradox, or tension, identified by feminist and other social welfare scholars, namely that, however progressive, social workers are involved in an inherently intrusive profession and are subject to class-based biases. At times, however, individual workers, particularly women, might "really listen" to a female client.[5] Like the case records involving

professional clients (see chapter 4), these files contain little explicit discussion of social-cultural factors, but much of the advice meted out reflected the staff's training in social work models that depicted Canadian (North American) models of marriage and family life as more modern and superior compared with European ones. Cases of marital conflict brought counsellors into contact with women from working-class and poor as well as middle-class backgrounds. There were also strong commonalities among the female clients, whose struggle to rebuild lives for themselves and their children in unfamiliar and reduced circumstances was further jeopardized by their conflicts with intimate partners. That the women counsellors handled close to two-thirds of the wife assault cases under review allows me to probe the affective dimension of interactions where both worker and client were newcomer women. I also ask whether the emotional labour that workers performed took a toll on their own emotional well-being.

My analysis engages as well the theory and method debates among historians researching emotions in the past through critical scrutiny of highly mediated textual sources.[6] An emotions frame that is sensitive to both discursive and materialist contexts in which newcomer couples in conflict conveyed their emotions, or had them interpreted by newcomer counsellors, particularly women, managing their own emotions, enriches our understanding of this theatre of encounter.[7] Drawing on historical and contemporary feminist studies of spousal conflict and intimate partner abuse, I argue, too, that the numerical dominance of the physically non-violent cases permits a more nuanced portrait of immigrant marital conflict in post-1945 Canada than studies, including my own, that focused almost entirely on domestic violence cases.[8] Finally, I draw some comparisons between the plight of the mainly European women featured here and that of more recent women from non-Western cultures enduring abuse in Canada and elsewhere. As regards the current debates over the need to "de-culturalize" so-called honour killings and situate them within the broad spectrum of violence against women,[9] the historical evidence presented here and elsewhere supports feminist arguments that systemic racism accentuates, rather than replaces, the material and ideological inequalities that give rise to violence against women.[10]

Emotions and Feminist Scholarship

Historians of emotions utilize divergent theoretical and methodological approaches, but generally subscribe to a social constructionist position. While recognizing a biological and cognitive element to feelings, they view the experiences, expressions, and interpretation of emotions as largely shaped by the societies and cultures in which they are imbedded. Depicting emotions as signifiers of social interaction, impactful cultural forces, and historical change agents, historians have examined the norms governing emotions and individual and collective responses to them; further they have tracked dominant, alternative,

and oppositional emotional communities or regimes.[11] Histories of affect have fruitfully explored the ways in which intimacy within local, cross-cultural, and transnational sites has been marked by both tender and tense ties.[12]

Here, I have incorporated certain insights from this literature into a feminist framework attuned to both the material and discursive. While rejecting the rigid post-structuralist stance that descriptors of emotion (or "linguistic labelling") can never convey real feelings (somatic expressions), I have, for example, applied Nicole Eustace's advice that, in searching for patterns of emotional expression and regulation in texts, we try to distinguish between who is articulating – or trying to articulate – or performing a given emotional state.[13] Or, put another way, one can recognize that the social worker's gaze (to invoke Foucault) is informed by training as well as subjectivity without relegating to fiction every observation of a client.[14] Similarly, while I do not accept the primacy that historians such as William Reddy and Frank Beiss have assigned to emotions, I have incorporated their valuable insights into emotional suffering and how its communication affects others in both intended and unintended ways.[15]

Historian Barbara Rosenwein's guidelines for interpreting sources produced by members of what she calls "emotional communities"[16] also have wider applicability. She advises us to consider the frequency and weight of emotional terms and phrases in our sources, and to look for whether body gestures are noted. We ought not rely solely on descriptors, but look, too, for what "individuals define and assess as valuable or harmful to them" because people express emotions about such matters. They also express emotions by how they label others. Rosenwein also urges us to read the metaphors (as in "I blew my stack"), because they can signify an emotion, and the silences, because unemotional texts can be as revealing as overtly emotional ones.[17] Once again, these files constituted professional narratives, but careful scrutiny of the recorded emotional (and unemotional) vocabulary, expressions, bodily gestures, and performances of the clients sheds light both on the newcomers' intimate lives and on the affective dimension of social work interactions that occurred within a multicultural but heavily white European context.

Feminists across the globe locate the roots of wife abuse and domestic violence in patriarchy, a hierarchically organized system of gender-based power that is universal but manifests in particular ways through historically specific economic and socio-cultural forms. Histories of sexuality, divorce, and spousal violence in Canada and beyond highlight the ideological and structural factors involved, including the patriarchal family and unequal contests over limited resources, and the recurring patterns, such as men's efforts to isolate, control, and humiliate intimate partners. Feminists note the role that factors such as economic dependency, isolation, shame, and fear of losing the children play in silencing women. They also acknowledge the particular disadvantages faced by immigrant women.[18]

Marital Conflict Cases

A subset of 100 cases from my database of 7,000 Institute case files involves marital conflict, and it is roughly divided between clients from "better-off" backgrounds (professionals, skilled technicians) and those of more plebeian status (former peasants, factory workers, labourers). But all of the cases involve financial struggle, and conflict over money, and men's control of it, is a source of tension. Almost twenty national or ethnic groups are represented, though six Eastern and Southern European groups account for two-thirds of the cases.[19] The ages range from mid-twenties to early-fifties, but many clients are in their thirties. The five European women counsellors who together handled just over half of all cases involving marital conflict and two-thirds of the wife assault cases include two Eastern European refugees and three Southern European immigrants. Of the four male workers, two Europeans (a refugee and an immigrant) handled all but five of the cases assigned to men; a different European immigrant and a racialized immigrant counsellor handled four and one of the five cases, respectively. In handling these cases, workers invariably invoked the egalitarian Canadian family ideal and other models and insights their training taught them, but the women in particular expressed a mistrust of certain husbands.

Three-quarters of the cases (75) in the subset of 100 cases include no evidence of physical violence, but a minority of them (25) clearly do. The ethnic profile of the first cluster[20] and the second[21] resembles that of the total subset, though each includes a higher percentage of "better-off" clients than the overall subset. Given the links between emotional and physical abuse, I stress that, while my categorization is carefully considered, the boundaries between the two were hardly rigid. Most of the women in the non-violent disputes were not Family Court referrals, and many already knew about the Institute, whereas the wife assault victims were mainly Family Court referrals. That women in both groups frequently requested help in placing children temporarily with an agency or orphanage so they could work reflected their grim material realities and the availability of (low-wage) female jobs in Toronto as well as a strategic use of "foster care" facilities. A few professional women asked about government-subsidized training courses, but most requested or held lower-skilled jobs. Most Family Court referrals laid a claim of non-support against husbands, though some filed for a legal separation or divorce. For most wives, after other strategies failed, the court was a last-resort legal strategy to pressure husbands into stopping their "bad" behaviour. A few husbands filed for separation.

In important respects, these women's situation and the overall patterns of abuse parallel those documented for women, both citizens and immigrants, in earlier and later eras in Canada[22] as well as in Europe, Britain, Australia, the United States, and elsewhere.[23] Such experiences were rooted in a patriarchal family form that crossed lines of class and culture, and that involved contests

over power and resources in which women were seriously disadvantaged, given their economic, social, and psychological subordination to male privilege. The traces of male narratives in the files reflect the presumed right of husbands to autonomy, to control both family resources and wives, and to exert authority over children. The recorded words and actions of women reveal the agency and courage of financially precarious and often isolated women who sought to use the limited options available to deal with a miserable or abusive marriage. They speak as well to the particular vulnerability of immigrant women who arrived as a sponsoring husband's dependent: fear of deportation on the grounds of "indigency" or "unsuitability" undoubtedly kept some of them from leaving husbands or seeking a divorce.[24]

The significant presence of women who fought with male partners without being physically beaten is noteworthy given the era's cultural stereotypes of "foreign" men as quintessential wife beaters and their women as the paradigmatic assault victim.[25] Women who taunted or deserted husbands or took lovers exposed themselves to accusations of immorality, however. Emotionally damaged husbands also require attention, but without losing sight of the fact that men who are emotionally or physically abusive, or both, towards their intimate partners cut across class, race, cultural, and other social categories of difference.

Women in Non-violent Disputes

Many of these 75 cases involve wives who complained about neglectful and irresponsible husbands who "foolishly" squandered wages – usually on drink, but also girlfriends, guitars, and cars – while ignoring "important things" like the bills and feeding children. Some made it clear, too, that their husband also demeaned them. They often did so not by describing feelings of anger or personal diminishment, but through recorded utterances of emotional phrases that appear repeatedly in the file entries: "he doesn't give me money for food" or "he drinks and locks me out of the house." Women also conveyed their hurt feelings, or emotional suffering, through recorded body gestures, including hand-wringing and tears. In 1958, an Austrian woman who collapsed into tears in her female worker's office said her husband "refuses to give her any money" and "tells her to get out of their place." But like others, she secured help in getting a job (cleaning) to support herself in case he left. A decade later, a Greek woman fought through tears to tell her female counsellor that "she is left out of the house" and that her "husband doesn't like her anymore." Convinced that a meddling brother-in-law was partially to blame, this counsellor, like the one in the chapter's opening story, recommended a separate residence. Again, the advice was reasonable, given the many immigrant women who were, then as now, compelled or forced to live with hostile in-laws, but the outcome is not recorded in the file.[26]

By contrast, a few women explained their decision to leave irresponsible husbands in ways that indicate their having undergone a shift in their emotional state from anger or despair to a firm resolve to leave the marriage. Instead of emotion words ("angry") or metaphors ("I blew up") there is an unemotional or matter-of-fact tone to the recorded entries. A former nutritionist from Germany, age 42, explained that the last straw was her husband opening an account with a department store in her name (she had a job), putting them further into debt. There is no venting of emotions, even though emoting may have increased her male counsellor's sympathy towards her. Instead, she revealed her plan to place an ad in a newspaper announcing that she would no longer cover his debts, apply for a legal separation, and hold on to the house. A 26-year-old nurse from Belgium who had secured legal aid in Toronto to apply for a legal separation from her husband in northern Ontario reported that, after recovering from two hospitalizations for "nervous depression" because of his irresponsible actions, she had moved on. Given the many women compelled to remain in loveless marriages, her decision to move miles away is noteworthy. That she left, initially, without her daughter suggests, too, that she was not afraid of his hurting the girl. Still, her file, which records her landing and losing a live-in babysitting job because her (jealous?) employer thought she paid insufficient attention to her children, underscores the precariousness of life as a single mother even in a city with plentiful low-wage jobs for women. One might argue that the apparent absence of a display of emotion meant these women suppressed their "real" feelings or feigned indifference. Seen through the now widely shared view that emotions contain rational, cognitive elements based on evaluations of what will increase or decrease one's emotional suffering or well-being, we might consider instead that these women managed to shed emotional investment in their husbands.[27]

A few women were despondent over failed love affairs, though none of the men, even the two-timing fiancés, were batterers. A young Portuguese live-in domestic whose fiancé was being deported to Portugal for having entered Canada illegally (as a ship stowaway) rejected her female worker's advice to stay put as she might later be able to sponsor him. She then returned "very upset" over the news he had "another girlfriend" in Canada, but also wanting a new job. A German clerk fed up with a waffling "fiancé," also the father of her child, asked her European male worker to pressure him into either marrying her or leaving them alone. She was reportedly "pleased" with the news that he agreed to a financial settlement in lieu of marriage. His name suggests a Middle Eastern heritage, but nothing is said about this being a mixed-ethnic union.[28]

Most inconsolable of all was a Filipina nurse, age 30, whose brother took her to the Institute in 1970, following a suicide attempt triggered by the actions of her fiancé, a doctor from India, who was backtracking on the marriage plans. It is the only case in the total subset of 100 cases where client and counsellor were both racialized immigrants from non-Western nations. The woman told

her male counsellor, a trained social worker, that after she and her fiancé had met as co-workers in a US hospital, they fell in love and moved in together, and discussed plans to get married. After she moved to Toronto in 1969 for a job, they had maintained a long-distance relationship, with him doing most of the visiting. However, as the fiancé began to argue that "the vast difference in Cultural and Religious background" would make life as his wife in India far too difficult – which she dismissed as "excuses" – happiness turned to despair. According to the file entries, the woman used a mix of medical diagnoses (depression, persistent suicidal thoughts) and descriptions of her behaviour (extremely irritable, short-tempered) to convey her despair. She added that the flare-ups had escalated during recent visits, though the fiancé "never" lost his temper (an observation that her brother confirmed), and that she had kicked him out. The file makes clear that she was also a dutiful daughter of a large transnational family. She had sponsored her brother (an engineer working as a security guard) and sister-in-law, a nurse, to Toronto, and financed her mother's recent visit. When the counsellor – who described her as "short stocky" but "neatly dressed" and a "cohesive" if "slow" thinker – raised the race issue, she insisted that race had not derailed the relationship. When he asked about other pressures, she said there were none.

The counsellor agreed with his client's diagnosis of depression, though the discussed follow-up sessions, including with the fiancé, never transpired. His advice that she own up to her suicide attempt as a step towards "greater self-awareness," and to apologize to her "boyfriend" because her "nasty temper" likely "hurt his feelings," seems heavy-handed. In an era marked by acute prejudice against mixed-race unions – so much so that Institute staff usually advised against them – his willingness to consider "the possibility of a smooth relationship" was liberal-minded. But the pluralist stance was undercut by the sexist assumption that his client would need "to convince her boyfriend of her willingness to sacrifice everything for him, and the sake of married life."[29] While this, too, was common enough in the period, the women counsellors, as we shall see, did think women could make some demands in a relationship.

The few women who expressed discomfort with their husband's sexual demands without reference to violence or fear of violence highlight sex as an unequal site of marital conflict and suggest that sexual conflict between "foreign" couples did not necessarily end in physical violence. Upon entering the office of her female counsellor, a young Hungarian bookkeeper interested in applying for a training course reportedly blurted out that she had been so "shocked" by her husband's "behavior" on their honeymoon night in Toronto that she left him and moved in with some "Hungarian friends." She explained that she had agreed to an arranged marriage after her Austria-based father responded to a marriage ad in a Hungarian newspaper from a man in Toronto. Having just lost the grandmother who raised her, she agreed to marry the man in order "to get out of Hungary." Still, some intimacy must have developed in the relationship

because a few months later she noted that, while she still could not talk about that night, she was "considering a reconciliation" as he "is nice to her and willing to compromise" in the bedroom.[30]

By contrast, a Ukrainian mother of two who in fall 1959 left her husband of seven years because of sexual dissatisfaction seemed the female villain in a sad tale of marital "breakdown" that left the husband deeply depressed. A referral letter to the Institute from a sympathetic senior social worker with the husband's psychiatric hospital said he suffered from "agonizing loneliness" and "nightmarish" dreams of "his wife torturing him with abusive words, as she used to in real life." She advised that, since the marriage "appears hopelessly broken," the focus be on finding the "amiable" man some friends through the Institute. The European male worker handling the case may well have had little trouble accepting the social worker's speculation about the man's depression being linked in part to his Catholicism given that social-cultural theories drew such connections.[31] After meeting the man, he concurred with the diagnosis.

Yet, other contents in the file reference the wife's emotional struggles. The excerpts from a letter she had sent to her husband's doctors claimed that, for years her "religious morals" had led her "to hide their unhappy intimate relationship," keeping up the façade of an "ideal" marriage for the "neighbours" even though she had "not derived any satisfaction from their intercourse." Then, after suffering a "nervous breakdown," her psychiatrist (whose own staff may have helped her with the letter) recommended against reconciliation. The caseworker wondered, instead, whether the wife's problems were due to menopause, thus also implying that she was depressed. The woman's refusal to let her daughters visit their father does beg the question whether her own pain had prevented her from feeling any sympathy for the emotional suffering her decision had caused him. Perhaps the answer lies partly in the hospital worker's observation that he was "still very much emotionally involved" with his wife, though he also expressed the hope that he might find some female as well as male companionship at the Institute. For a man accused of not being able to satisfy his wife, he may have viewed a new relationship as confirmation of his manhood. The Institute caseworker later proclaimed that the two counselling sessions had been of therapeutic value for the man, who expressed appreciation for the support, and registered him into the Institute's house program.[32]

Emotional Struggles

We find, too, some women ensnared in ugly debates triggered by their or their husband's suspicion and jealousy, again without evidence of battery or the threat of it, though the files indicate men's efforts to reassert their authority. A woman who complained about her husband sending money to, and even visiting, a former lover and their "illegitimate" son in Portugal while she supported

a family of five on a teenage daughter's meagre wages, said the constant shouting matches had caused her to develop a heart condition, forcing her to quit work. The husband countered that he had "nothing to do with that woman," but sent only small gifts of money to the boy. After two sessions with him, the immigrant female counsellor optimistically reported that he had agreed "to treat his family well," which included giving his wife more money and even opening a joint savings account. The wife initially confirmed they were "very happy" and "living well together," but a few months later renewed her claim of non-support.[33]

An "infuriated" Greek man filed for legal separation after his pregnant wife visited Greece while he was in a Toronto sanitarium receiving treatment for tuberculosis (TB). In a reversal of the usual gender pattern, the wife, a skilled dressmaker, had sponsored him to come to Canada following a long-distance courtship and marriage by proxy. After meeting with them separately, the European male counsellor recorded their competing stories. He accused her of having an affair in Greece (or in Montreal or Vancouver), and of depleting their savings even though she was the breadwinner. Having earlier refused to do his laundry, he added, she waited a week after returning to Toronto before visiting him in hospital. Accusing her of wanting to reconcile only because she was pregnant, he also wanted proof that "the child belongs to him." She said she had visited family in Greece because she was pregnant, sick, and temporarily homeless after her husband's aunt had forced her to leave her house so she could rent it. Noting they had spent little time together because his TB symptoms manifested a few months after he arrived in Toronto, she spoke, too, of needing "a change" after putting up with his obnoxious behaviour during her hospital visits. She also said that she wanted to reunite as she was generally "pleased" with him (and his aunt), and wanted to keep the child, adding that she could earn enough to support it.

Of the husband, the European male worker noted that any mention of his wife sent him into "confused outbursts" during which he could not be reasoned with, and attributed his troubles to emotional immaturity. The man's refusal to negotiate appeared to offer him a sense of reasserting his authority (or saving face) over an employable and strong-willed wife. The counsellor recommended delaying further counselling until the husband's health improved, and then to refer the couple to a better-resourced family agency that might help him see his way towards reconciliation.[34]

There are also a few women who, sapped of the psychic and emotional reserves needed to live with a mentally ill husband, and guilt-stricken over their adversely affected children, walked out. The professionally transmuted expressions of emotion contained in these files (see chapter 3) convey a sense of the very real havoc that such prolonged emotional suffering wreaked on the women. A European male counsellor said of a Dutch woman determined to

leave her schizophrenic husband despite her church elders' disapproval because of her son's worsening "emotional problems," that she, too, appeared to "suffer mentally" from the situation. Although sympathetic, his advice – to "try to improve her appearance a bit for herself and the children's sake," and try some "forms of relaxation" – was not terribly helpful.[35]

The lengthiest (one-year) file in this group features a 35-year-old Slovakian woman, Mrs H., who left a decade-long marriage to a man institutionalized in both Czechoslovakia and Canada while he was undergoing electroshock therapy in Toronto. The entries track her efforts to use every option available to secure a decent home for herself and their two children. They capture both her fears of deportation and her remarkable resilience. When she first visited the Institute, she admitted to the European woman worker assigned to her case that her welfare officer's talk of deportation had scared her into finding any type of work – but also that she was "very worried about the children," especially a son exhibiting his father's pronounced mood swings. Clearly, the government worker had used the threat of deportation to force Mrs H. back to work rather than try to extend her welfare supports so she could deal with her children. A refugee who had fled Communism, she was clearly terrified by the prospect of being sent back to Czechoslovakia. Significantly, the Institute counsellor addressed both issues. First, she referred Mrs H. to a Hungarian-speaking psychiatrist for her son, explaining that, given her situation, the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) would cover the cost. Then, she found her a job with one of the many middle-class Toronto women who hired Institute clients as "cleaning ladies."

A few months later, Mrs H. announced that she was "living common law" with a Czech man she knew from home and was pregnant by him. She added, with obvious delight, that he would "put the whole family" on his insurance coverage, only to report soon afterwards that he had returned home. At her wit's end, she applied for a visitor's visa to the United States to see her parents, whom she now hoped to join permanently. But her plans were undermined, first by an operation to remove a painful gallstone, and then by the refusal of a visitor's visa because she was a welfare recipient. She then faced pressure from the social workers at her husband's hospital to care for him at home. Her caseworker helped her to pen a reply that says she is "in no position" to do so as she now "has 3 children to care for." The case ends with her applying for Ontario Housing (subsidized housing) and filing for a legal separation from her husband.[36]

Angry and Damaged Husbands

The handful of cases involving husbands who were angry, even vengeful, but also damaged emotionally by a wife's actions, catch some of the male losers of these disputes.[37] One Hungarian man was "so upset" to learn his wife in Hungary had disappeared with a lover and abandoned their teenage daughter that

he began drinking heavily, lost his job, got further depressed and, on Christmas Day 1958, attempted suicide. His female counsellor then expressed concern about his befriending a "very neurotic" female client, but later admitted the "friendship" was helping him. A decade later, a Portuguese man whose wife reportedly left him and their two children because of his bitter "dissatisfaction" with Canada, became an Institute client. His complaint about the police refusing to "bring her back to him" suggests he was further embittered by her rejection of his authority. The recorded observations of his European male caseworker also speak to the emotional suffering of a father who needed to work but who could not bring himself to place his children in a temporary foster home. So, too, does the frustrated caseworker's complaint about the man's crying upsetting the children. (His parents had remained in Portugal to care for a "retarded" child so he had no family to help him with his children.) "Whenever a suitable foster home is found," an entry reads, "he comes up with objections." These comments also suggest that, notwithstanding the social-cultural principle of respecting "other" cultural norms regarding emotional expression, this Northern European worker thought his Southern European client overly emotional. His last entry notes that the client's "emotional outburst" in front of the latest potential foster parents will likely again end badly.[38]

Some estranged husbands who felt humiliated or diminished as a man or outraged by a hostile wife's taunts, sexual infidelities, or treatment of children tried to enlist the Institute's help in punishing her for her "immorality." As the following two cases illustrate, a wife's evident culpability could differ enormously. The first file tracks the efforts of an increasingly desperate Hungarian man whose wife called him too lazy to work despite debts, then threatened to move in with her mother in Montreal, and finally "kicked him out" and took in a lover, to recruit various counsellors into stopping her welfare supports. He first claimed that she gave the lover money out of her welfare cheque, but neglected the children, who he claimed wanted to live with him. Then he reported (disingenuously) that, since spending just one night in jail because of a late night "quarrel" with his rival, she tormented him with shouts of "criminal." (Like other estranged couples, they lived near each other.) He returned wanting help in tracking down a joint account he thought they had opened, only to be told he needed a lawyer for that. And, finally, that she had admitted to having just "tried to provoke an abortion herself," saying she hoped it "would work again" as it had a year previously. While the counsellors already thought the wife a less-than-ideal mother, his efforts stopped neither her affair nor her welfare payments. She got her divorce. Meantime, the seemingly hapless man got injured on a job he had recently begun and asked for help in filing a claim with the Ontario Workmen's Compensation Board.[39]

The second wife, whose estranged husband, a Hungarian tradesman employed as a dishwasher, accused her not only of having sex with men in front of

their daughter but also of sexually abusing the toddler is the only such case in my entire database. Written in a tone of disgust and outrage, the husband's letter to police justifying his abduction of the girl is the main source of information about the wife's sexual trysts, her late-night fights in restaurants with ex-lovers, and occasional prostitution (oral sex for $5). The male lovers, who, along with a female neighbour, were listed as potential witnesses for the divorce and child custody case, had clearly provided many of the lurid details. The man's letter, which may have had a co-author, was blunt. It noted that his daughter sometimes climbed on top of him and, using sexual language, "demonstrated the usual movements of sexual intercourse." Turning to the sexual abuse he said he witnessed, he wrote that his wife dismissed his objections, first to encouraging the girl to masturbate alongside her while they watched television, and then to "play[ing] with her "in this way," by saying "it was her daughter" and she could do as she wished. (If true, her excuse echoed that of abusive men towards their wives.) Meanwhile, the husband added with dripping sarcasm, she had the welfare agencies convinced she was "moral." The European female counsellor expressed her own hostile feelings towards the wife (who denied everything in court) in two ways. First, she called the wife's words in a letter she sent to her husband as "terrible" and "disgusting." (The letter is not in the file and we do not know whether she is its sole author.) Second, the worker dubs the woman a sexual outcast ("nymphomaniac"), though the labelling also reflected her suspicion that she was mentally ill.[40]

Wife Assault Cases

Institute counsellors were witnesses to the pain and trauma of wife battery. It was particularly true of the women who handled two-thirds of the twenty-five wife assault cases. The files record cases of husbands of Ukrainian, Italian, Hungarian, and other ethnicities who repeatedly hit, slapped, punched, and kicked their wives, or poisoned or drugged them. The files also record the degrading insults and threats, the controlling behaviour, and the heavy drinking that often accompanied the beatings. Portuguese, Slovakian, and Greek wives who criticized husbands who came home late from drinking his or, in some cases, her, wages, were beaten, sometimes until they were "black and blue." So, too, were Austrian, Yugoslavian, and other wives who challenged their husbands' authority over the children. Husbands taunted wives with talk of "girlfriends" and then beat them for demanding or begging them to give them up. They accused them of infidelity, claiming they slept with a male neighbour or a relative, a boarder in their rooming house, or the man in the "upstairs" flat. There were violent outbursts from estranged husbands who showed up to torment a wife, or rape her, or to abduct a child. A few men did jail time for the attempted murder of wives they accused of infidelity.[41]

Most husbands rejected Institute counselling, even when the court ordered it, their absence a reminder of those who, as Annalee Golz observed for an earlier era, used "stony silence" as a defence strategy.[42] A European male counsellor handled one of the few cases where an abusive husband, a Greek immigrant, joined his wife for counselling at the Institute. The wife, who had recently undergone a fifth hospital surgery, explained how her husband, a diagnosed alcoholic and referral from the Research Addiction Foundation, excused his drinking, obnoxious behaviour (he ruins every wedding and party, she said, and made her feel ashamed), infidelity (girlfriends), and beatings – which he called "spankings" – of their "mentally retarded child." In words recorded in the file, she also conveyed the emotional effect of life in a loveless marriage: "when he comes home he does not even ask his wife what she wants, give her a kiss and love the children" but "just goes out to drink." Aware that the staff of the institution where she hoped to place her child thought the woman in danger of a "break down," the counsellor also recorded her descriptions of her husband's controlling behaviour. He would not let her book a hair appointment, "dress properly," or "go out alone." He used the pretext of a shaving kit that had shifted slightly from the spot where he had left it to accuse her of infidelity. In a twist to the usual pattern, he hit her or the child not when drinking, but when told not to drink.

The counsellor noted that the husband's "red" face betrayed a serious drinking problem. Then that he spent much of the session blaming his financial woes and "nervous" condition on his parents, whom he said beat him as a child, his medication (too strong), and on the child, whom he disowned. He also expressed much envy towards his better-off brothers. We know that victims sometimes "talk back" to their abusers or "act out," whether by smashing dishes or taking lovers. But in suggesting that she shared some blame for the abuse because she accused her husband of being weak, the counsellor engaged in victim blaming. In the end, though, he attributed the problem mainly to the husband's emotional immaturity, and the case ends with the plans for the child's institutionalization moving forward. Meanwhile, the husband was scheduled for treatment at a mental health clinic, making this case also one of several where wives tried to stop the violence by getting a husband whom they thought was suffering from mental illness committed.[43]

Emotions Work

In handling the wife assault cases, female counsellors conveyed feelings of sympathy towards their clients. Did they develop bonds of trust with them? And did the emotions work they performed cause them emotional suffering? Recent studies on the emotional and physical toll of providing caring labour in the human services field and on "compassion fatigue" among "helping" professionals and volunteers offer constructive ways of addressing these questions.

The Institute female counsellors differ markedly from the flight attendants who provided the basis for sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's affect-based theory of the harm done to human service workers forced to feign, and encouraged to internalize, emotions intended to keep customers and profit-making corporate owners happy. But it is helpful to think of them in terms of a "managed heart."[44] The requirement to constantly perform as the knowledgeable, empathetic, confident, and persuasive social worker no matter one's own feelings could be stressful, especially given the emotionally demanding caseloads involving angry, anxious, sad, despondent, and desperate clients.[45] As for the early clinical evidence indicating compassion fatigue, or secondary trauma syndrome (STS), among social workers, human rights workers, and others who work extensively and for lengthy periods with trauma victims, I have neither private diaries nor clinical records that document counsellors referring to STS symptoms. Only recently, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, have experts acknowledged compassion fatigue, or STS, among those who work extensively with trauma victims as a phenomenon. The syndrome is not limited to women, but, given women's predominance in social work practice, many are vulnerable to it. Mirroring those of their clients, the symptoms range from irritability, sadness, numbness of feelings, and depression to avoidance of work, and flashbacks in which one has a sense of "reliving" (the client's) experience.[46]

My sources do, however, contain evidence of the stress and anxiety of counselling work, and the emotional wear and tear of handling many traumatic stories and difficult conversations. Most husbands might have rejected Institute counselling, even when ordered by the Family Court, but they showed up to try to charm, intimidate, or harangue female counsellors about their wives. A few of them charged into the offices, demanding to see the "lady" who helped his wife. One husband punched a male counsellor, drawing blood and sending him to hospital.[47] As frequent court interpreters, female staff heard men spout all-too-familiar accusations (she's low-class, a prostitute, a whore) and excuses (it's because of drink or poverty or some other perceived unfairness). That a few of them took a leave in order to deal with their own family crises, sometimes abroad in Europe, is also suggestive. As is the significant turnover (with a few exceptions) in the counselling staff. The admittedly fragmentary personal correspondence among staffers suggests, too, that women's friendships helped them to deal with the emotional demands of the job.[48] The following assessment of a number of the wife assault cases handled by two of the Institute's female workers takes account of this larger context.[49]

The woman counsellor who handled most of these cases was one of the Institute's multilingual refugees from Eastern Europe. She carried a diverse caseload that included clients from Asia and Central and South America as well as Europe. The second counsellor was one of the Portuguese immigrant counsellors who hailed from a city in mainland Portugal, spoke Spanish and Portuguese,

and dealt with Central and South American as well as Southern European clients. As middle-class European women who landed jobs in Canada as social workers (even if not fully accredited ones), these staffers were differently situated than the wife assault victims, including those of middle-class origins. But their handling of these cases reveals a strong capacity for sympathy, albeit one that sometimes bordered on pity, if not the empathy expected of the fully professional social worker. And clearly their concern was not limited to clients who shared their own class or ethnic background.[50]

The Eastern European counsellor's response to Mrs A., a former Dutch nurse who confessed that years of physical and emotional abuse had made her an alcoholic, fits this pattern. Despite a large caseload, she took the time to have "a long talk" with Mrs A., whose husband had recently deserted her, in order "to keep her spirits up" because "she was very, very upset." She recorded having applauded the woman for recently joining Alcoholics Anonymous, which she claimed was helping. In response to the client's nearly destitute state – which made her vulnerable to deportation – the worker promised to provide more help. Her efforts paid off when a Dutch embassy official agreed to provide Mrs A. with additional financial help and a lawyer for the divorce. An ability to listen to a client also characterizes this worker's response to a "very upset" working-class Hungarian client. When she first raised the possibility of reconciliation, the woman retorted that "she had a terrible life with that man," who, she found out, had been through three wives, and was "a very questionable character … not able to look after a family." Having "heard" her client, the worker, in implicit defiance of Catholic Family Services, which was pressuring the woman to return to her husband, helped her get a separate flat, a job, and some second-hand clothing and furniture.[51]

The Portuguese counsellor's file entries on her Portuguese clients also suggest strong feelings of sympathy towards women enduring wife assault. A tone of sadness bordering on pity informs her notations about a young woman whose husband had poisoned her when she was pregnant in hopes of killing the baby. First there is the explanation that the woman had to send her "very ill" child to her parents in Portugal because they were dependent upon her Toronto wages. Then an acknowledgment that this dutiful daughter's critical role in a transnational family economy was suffering from an emotional transnationalism ("she cries a lot because she is far away from her baby") rooted in women workers' painful separation from their own children.[52]

The same worker's advice to a pregnant hairdresser whose husband kept threatening "to beat her in the tummy so she will lose the child" to "stay with him until the baby arrives [as] maybe he will change" illustrates the prevailing pro-family approach. A genuine concern for the woman is nonetheless evident from her accompanying advice that, should he not change, "to leave him because she is too young to start suffering this way." Her wait-and-see advice

might have still rankled.[53] A mix of sympathy and pity similarly marked the Portuguese counsellor's response to a former telephone operator who was supporting a teenager and mother on the low wages of a hotel chambermaid. After hearing about the beatings and a hernia operation gone terribly wrong, she took the Portuguese woman home for lunch, and then escorted her to the local welfare office to apply for support. She also found her cleaning work.[54]

On occasion, these counsellors did lose their patience with a wife assault victim whom they believed was lying or making poor choices. To draw from the refugee counsellor's larger caseload, she bluntly told one abused wife separated from her husband that she would lose her mother's allowance support if she did not stop allowing the husband back into the house.[55] She was equally blunt with another mother's allowance recipient who had left her abusive husband and moved into a midtown apartment with new furniture that she could not have possibly afforded, saying that if she did not drop her story about an American cousin helping her out, and seriously downgrade, she would lose her support. She issued the ultimatum after home visits conducted by DPW staff revealed evidence of a man (not the cousin) living in the flat (men's clothing scattered about). Her young children unwittingly undermined her claim to be doing a friend's laundry when they attested to a Mr G. living with them a few days a week. The woman agreed to move to DPW-approved housing, though she had to make a fuss in order to avoid being located near her husband. She also got her divorce, though securing child support became more complicated after he returned to Hungary. The worker also helped the woman renegotiate the payment schedule for the furniture debt with which her ex-lover had saddled her.[56]

Like her colleagues, this counsellor could also be ineffectual, as evidenced by the file on the one racialized victim of wife assault. Although a teacher, Mrs G., age 33, and her young son arrived in Toronto from India in 1969 as the sponsored dependants of her husband, a skilled technician who undoubtedly entered Canada under the points system.[57] The woman's harrowing tale of arrival dominates the file. The ordered structure of the story and some probable editorializing on the counsellor's part reminds us that we are reading a professionally rendered narrative. But the verbatim quoting of the client and the piling up of details contain critical traces of the woman's voice and her courageous effort to seek help. The one lengthy entry explains that Mrs G. spent hours at the airport waiting for her husband before calling a male friend of his, who helped her to rent a bachelor apartment in the building where his family lived. The husband then showed up at the apartment, but, instead of "look[ing] after his family," he "took away her passport, and Jewels" and said he was sending her "back to India." Tapping the few networks at hand, she contacted and moved in with another family from her home village who lived in Brampton, a neighbouring city and a magnet for South Asian immigrants. But after the man "molested" her, she returned to Toronto. Telling the counsellor that she wanted to remain

in Canada, Mrs G. asked her not to divulge her current address to anyone as her husband was trying to track her down and had even contacted the police. The counsellor ensured her complete confidentiality and asked her permission to contact a family agency that might help, but her notes on the phone call with the agency worker reveals the irony of the Institute's family approach. Despite Mrs G.'s desperate desire to stay away from her husband, the two social workers prioritized reunification. To that end, the Institute counsellor agreed to first "interview" the (completely elusive) husband in order to "explain his responsibilities" as a sponsor to support his wife, and to inform him of Canadian laws against wife battery. She added that, should he not cooperate, Mrs G. would be referred to a legal aid officer for help in getting established on her own. The case ends, though, with the counsellor telling a frustrated Mrs G., also in need of a job, that she cannot register with the government employment service (Canada Manpower) without a passport.[58]

The lengthiest files involving wife assault reflect interactions, albeit interrupted ones, across a lengthy time period and offer insight into the circumstances in which female counsellors developed bonds of trust with a wife assault victim.[59] The cases follow a general pattern by which the counsellor, faced with compelling evidence that the marriage is beyond repair, abandons efforts at reconciliation and becomes the client's ally. That evidence often came from female neighbours who corroborated a woman's stories of the husband's verbal and physical abuse, including in legal affidavits. Some workers also witnessed the men's erratic or threatening behaviour during home visits, in court, or at the Institute. A positive evaluation of the woman's reputable behaviour also played a role, but so, too, did her distraught state.[60] The cases in question also hint at the emotional wear and tear experienced by female counsellors from their professional, and personal, investment in the women. Here, I highlight three examples.

As court interpreter for the case, the Portuguese counsellor already knew a depressing amount about Mrs S., a Portuguese Family Court referral who had left her husband two years previously because of regular beatings. Shortly before giving birth to her third child, he had beaten her "so badly" that "the baby was born with black marks all over his body." The worker also knew that for this immigrant woman, the challenges of living with hostile in-laws had reached grotesque proportions. Mrs S. had managed to run away during an incident in which the mother-in-law pulled her by her hair along the house corridor while a brother-in-law covered her mouth to keep her quiet. She eventually broke free and the neighbours, hearing her screams, called the police. When Mrs S. returned for her children, the husband released only one of them. The worker's notes on a counselling session with the couple record an exchange in which the husband, who came to further torment, not reconcile with, his wife, rudely dismissed the (familiar) suggestion that they find an apartment "without his family." He said "he would rather have a prostitute as a wife." Expressing her

contempt for him, the counsellor wrote, "if they would reconcile, it would only be to get [her] pregnant again, and she would be left with three children to support." Abandoning talk of reconciliation, she now advised Mrs S. to apply for the government-subsidized commercial-skills course in order to improve her ability to support her children "in case her husband runs away and does not give any financial support." The suggestion of a training course (with subsidy) that promised better returns than the usual dead-end jobs lined up for clients reflected the worker's sympathy for, but also personal and emotional investment in, "a young, attractive girl" whom she expected to become a single mother. The husband's frank admission in court that he would repeatedly abuse again if made to live with his wife prompted the judge to begin divorce proceedings.[61]

The shift in the Eastern European caseworker's opinion of a working-class Hungarian woman who moved to Toronto from Eastern Canada for work and her husband's health (TB) from that of suspicion to sympathy similarly suggests a capacity to really listen to a client. Before the woman's revelation that her husband beat her and spread lies about her having contracted venereal disease as a result of sexual promiscuity, the counsellor described her in unflattering terms, as "a very husky woman" and an unreliable worker who kept annoying potential employers on the Institute's roster by not showing up to clean their houses. Thereafter, she continued to handle the woman's requests for practical assistance, but the tone of her notes changes dramatically. She expresses delight over the news that the woman will spend Christmas with an out-of-town daughter. When she visited the Institute after a ten-month break during which she got divorced, the counsellor calls her "a good old friend" who is "now happy as [her ex-husband] is not pestering her any more." Only a year after landing a "nice" office job at a golf club, she adds, the woman was head of the department and earning "a good pay and a generous bonus." Yet, even this case underscores the precariousness of these women's lives. A year after their happy reunion, the woman was laid off and the counsellor was lining up cleaning jobs. Written after a follow-up call, the final entry indicates the woman's altered emotional state, and hints at the worker's own feelings of disappointment: "Tells me the places were very dirty and is hard work to clean everything up … a little cheese sandwich she is getting all day for this hard work."[62]

Another of this worker's cases that speaks to a relationship of trust that emerged between differently situated refugee women involved a Hungarian woman of humble (possibly rural) origins who complained about her often-drunk husband's beatings and refusal to support his family. He had also done some jail time for drunk-driving convictions. The worker conducted a home visit to evaluate the woman's eligibility for emergency support from an Institute co-sponsor. In her report (which noted a "clean" home and children) she recorded her conversation with the distraught woman. She recounted depressingly familiar scenarios – he beat her for refusing to let him take the

children "for a drive" while "totally drunk" – and dilemmas – she had "to leave the children somewhere" so she could work and help cover the rent and debts, but he threatened to kill her if she contacted the Catholic Children's Aid Society (CCAS). When asked why she thought he acted this way, she said she had "no idea," but that his own explanation – homesickness – was "a lie," as his mother in Hungary said he was "a heavy drinker" back home. Subsequent entries record an ever-escalating situation in which the "almost continually drunk" husband threatened to kill his children, then, "in a rage, damages the furniture and throws things," then, at other times, "cries for no apparent reason." They also track the growing desperation of a woman who, now convinced her husband is mentally ill and likely to get worse, is reaching an emotional breaking point. Convinced that she has good reason to be afraid of her husband, the counsellor, who also appears to have agreed to help her try to get her husband into a mental ward for treatment, gets the woman to promise to call the police the next time he causes trouble.

The woman secured the legal separation a few months later, but facing near-destitution at Christmastime, she returned to ask for a food basket and children's gifts. She also confessed that, unless she could temporarily place the children, she was "afraid she would hit them because of the pressures she was under." She spoke as well of wanting "to get off" welfare, find a job, and "get back on her feet." The confession suggests some trust, or a relationship, however unequal, had developed between counsellor and client. The worker's later entries also indicate her growing anxiety over her client's safety, particularly after she gave in to pressure from the husband, who kept insisting on his fatherly "right" to "look after" his sons, to divulge the name of the CCAS worker. Before she could get hold of the woman to "warn her" about what happened, she learned that he had "tracked" her down, and that, in a "highly intoxicated state," was threatening to beat her. This time, however, the worker recorded, with obvious relief, the woman called the police, who removed him from her flat. And, then, following a four-month gap, the final entry reports that the sobered-up husband was back home and they were saving for a trip to Hungary. The counsellor does not record a response, though she likely worried about the woman's situation. Nor does the outcome negate the trust that the Hungarian woman placed in her female counsellor during an especially trying, and scary, time.[63]

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the trust established between a female caseworker and her client, or certainly the most overtly emotional text in these files, is the suicide letter sent to the Eastern European counsellor by a Hungarian refugee nurse and long-time wife-assault victim. She is likely the sole author of the letter, which was written a year after she became an Institute client. The counsellor's file entries indicate that, in that time, she had helped the woman find some paid work and located a foster home and a summer camp for her children, and then supported her to secure a divorce in Family Court.

The client's use of the worker's first name in the opening salutation ("Dear *"), a rare occurrence, suggests that a trusting though still hierarchical "professional friendship" had developed between a counsellor-turned-erstwhile-protector and her client/victim. So, too, does the body of the text, which reads: "I am very sorry I was so much trouble to you," but "bodily and spiritually I am breaking down." "I would like to live to see my children grown up," it adds, "but I wouldn't be able to stand losing them." Blaming her plight on her husband's years of cruelty, and expressing hope that God will forgive her (she is Catholic), she asks her worker "to see that my children get loving care from someone who will substitute for the mother they lost this way."[64]

Significantly, the suicide letter, and the relationship it represents, prompt the hospital psychiatrists and doctors to involve the Institute caseworker in the woman's recovery plans, though we do not know what ultimately happened to her. It was not an egalitarian relationship. The women shared a middle-class Eastern European refugee background, but they occupied very different positions within the social work relationship, respectively as an employed knowledge-based professional seeking to protect a wife-assault victim and the other the victim. One of two cases involving attempted suicide, the case also contains entangled narratives of abuse and mental health. But whereas such discussion usually focused on the abusive man's mental health, here the discovery that she used poison brought "from home" prompts speculation of "a pre-existing personality disorder" or a long-time "depressed state" related to her "personal difficulties."[65]

Then and Now

Since the early 2000s, the occurrence of a relatively small number of high-profile "honour killings" involving particularly South Asians in Canada of Muslim and Sikh background has generated debate, including among feminists. On the one hand, some commentators, including some feminists working with women in these communities, distinguish historically observed Western patterns of male abuse of women from the "newer" (for Canada) and supposedly more "culturally driven" violence against women and girls committed by husbands, fathers, or brothers often with the support of women and extended family members.[66] Similar commentary exists for Iraqi, Iranian, Kurdish, and other non-Western immigrants and refugees in Europe, Australia, and other parts of these far-flung diasporas. On the other, leading feminists such as Mojab argue that such a characterization of gender-based violence misses the mark. Honour killing, they note, does differ from most domestic violence in that it is premeditated, planned (sometimes for years), and involves a collective action against women or girls accused of having disgraced the family usually through some sexual transgression. Nevertheless, it is a particular socio-cultural form of the

universal phenomenon of violence against women. Furthermore, essentializing this honour-based crime – defined as such because male murder of "deviant" female members supposedly restores the family's honour within the community – in terms of a particular religion, culture, race, nation, or immigrant community lets Western cultures, where men who kill their intimate partners are treated as an aberration, off the hook. It also serves to enhance racism and xenophobia in the hostland.[67]

Even my admittedly limited research base of predominantly pre-1970 wife-assault cases supports a de-culturalized (or de-exoticized) explanation of honour-based crimes that situates them instead within the broad spectrum of violence against women. One or two cases do not a pattern make, and trying to measure degrees of abuse is risky. But let us juxtapose the actions of Mrs G.'s Indian husband, who stole her passport in the hopes of getting her deported, to that of the two European men, one Ukrainian, the other Hungarian, who tried to kill the wife they accused of infidelity. Their modus operandi was hanging by rope and a crushing hammer blow to the head, respectively. The six-month sentence the first man received for an assault conviction – he avoided a murder charge because his 12-year-old son found his mother before it was too late – still speaks volumes on the era's indifference to wife battery. The second husband, who had used flowers and an apology for an earlier beating as a ruse to get into the neighbour's house to which his pregnant wife had earlier fled, got five years for fracturing her skull. After recovering, she faced a whopping $900 hospital bill, though she successfully filed for divorce. The European men's allegations and attacks also fit a narrative of male honour restored.[68]

Indeed, the honour-shame complex that today is discussed primarily with respect to the Middle East, Africa, and Asia did not disappear from post-1945 Europe. For example, traditions of elopement by abduction, arranged and forced marriages, and honour-based crimes continued to influence gender relations in regions across Southern Europe, though they also came under critique and modification. As feminist readings (as opposed to outdated anthropological models) of the honour-shame complex show, the (modified) code also travelled to immigrant communities abroad, including Toronto, where, again, it underwent revision, including by youths, in hostland contexts.[69] The Eastern European cases documenting marital rape and gruesome beatings of wives can be understood not only as male ill-adjustment due to wartime loss and refugee experiences, but also in terms of homeland politics and culture. As a matter of social policy, Communist authorities, note feminist gender scholars, largely ignored domestic violence and the prevailing popular view of this taboo subject was that women were largely to blame for its occurrence. The absence of social services to support female victims and the chronic housing shortages also made it almost impossible for women to escape the violence.

Nor did the women's movements in Eastern Bloc states raise the subject, as they did in the West.[70]

There are a few noteworthy European cases in the database involving meddling and abusive in-laws who participated, not in a premediated murder of a daughter- or sister-in-law, but in a planned abduction of her children. At least two mothers-in-law refused to let an estranged daughter-in-law see her children.[71] Now, as in the past, the media focus on sensational court cases of femicide, but pay comparatively little attention to the efforts of women who seek out the limited resources available to help them reduce or escape an abusive marriage.[72]

There are also differences. Many post-1945 European immigrants experienced anti-immigrant discrimination, and the struggles of abused women to house and care for their children attest to the material deprivations and humiliations endured. Still, the reality of systemic racism means that racialized women from non-Western cultures are more likely than white Western women to be disbelieved by officials and to be refused housing by landlords. At shelters and social agencies, they encounter social workers who blame the violence on their "culture," thus further stigmatizing the victim. Feminist critiques of the male leaders and community members who, consciously exploiting multiculturalism-inspired fears among Canadians of appearing racist, defend honour-based crimes on the grounds of cultural traditions, religious values, and community norms surely expose one of the greatest ironies of this liberal ideology.[73]

Conclusion

At once highly mediated and revealing sources, the case files on marital conflict illuminate the paradoxical nature of the Toronto Institute's social work practices. On the one hand, the value of its pluralist approach is underscored by the recommendations of women's groups and settlement service activists working with today's immigrant wife-assault victims that agencies recruit front-line staff from the women's immigrant communities and provide linguistically and culturally "appropriate" services. Most of the Institute's front-line immigrant and refugee counsellors, and all but one of the women, were not professional social workers with university credentials but rather community practitioners. While training and debriefing sessions emphasized its value, the file entries and occasional casework reports particularly of the female workers suggest they did not consistently practice empathy. Sometimes, though, a sympathetic ear led to helping a woman get what she wanted. The wife-assault cases highlight in particular not only counsellors' sympathy towards abused women but the meaningful if temporary and still asymmetrical relationships that sometimes developed between the European female counsellors and their mostly European female clients.

This is not to suggest that the efficacy of the interventions necessarily required the profile of counsellor and client to be a perfect match, since, as some experts warn, a woman will not always wish to speak with a member of her "community."[74] The Hungarian nurse who survived her suicide attempt might well have preferred a Hungarian-speaking woman counsellor who was not Hungarian to a male Hungarian counsellor on staff, whether because she thought a woman more likely to be sympathetic or that it would give her some protection from community gossip. Violated by a family "friend" as well as her husband, the one South Asian client may have preferred a white European female worker to the Institute's lone South Asian male counsellor.

Institute social workers claimed that their insight into the group-based culture of clients offered them a valuable diagnostic tool and a roadmap towards treatment. In practice, however, a counsellor's possession of the necessary linguistic skills, a basic familiarity with a client's social and cultural background, and a respectful approach, rather than a detailed typology of the supposed ethno-cultural traits of the client's ethnic group, helped to establish a rapport with a client. And it was the advice or action taken by a counsellor to support a woman stuck in a miserable or violent marriage that best helped to build trust. On occasion, an Institute male counsellor also lent a sympathetic ear. Still, the stress involved evidently took more of a toll on the female workers who handled more of these difficult cases. Or at least the male workers' notes are not forthcoming on this point.

There are some parallels between Institute efforts to reform the behaviour of abusive husbands along the lines of the celebrated companionate Canadian model – which assumed a breadwinning and authoritative but domesticated and supportive husband – and the recommendation issued by those who attribute male violence against women in today's racialized communities to non-Western cultures for a systematic acceleration of Canadianization. In both cases, the call to indoctrinate the "foreign" men into the hostland values assumes that all but the exceptionally deviant Canadian (or North American) men respect their wives as their equal.[75] Such calls underscore the slipperiness of notions of integration and assimilation, echoing as it does the Institute leaders and social work consultants who advanced the paradoxical argument that immigrants could be assimilated into the dominant values of the host society while maintaining their distinct cultural traditions. Furthermore, cultures are not static entities, and, as Mojab and other feminist antiracist scholars note, the notion that non-Western immigrant families must emulate Western standards ignores the fact that the homelands in question have in some cases been the site of century-long feminist struggles for gender equity and rights.[76]

The product of multicultural encounters that occurred within a predominantly white European context, the Institute files say little about the (mis)

treatment that non-English-speaking European women may have experienced at the hands of employers, court officials, or agency staff. By contrast, today's front-line counsellors are taught to appreciate that their racialized client's efforts to access legal and social support systems will be constrained by the systemic racism that infuses every sector of the wider society, including housing, the justice system, and social welfare services.[77] Finally, front-line workers today are advised to assume violence rather than force a woman, who has probably faced multiple traumas prior to her current situation, to (repeatedly) share her "abuse narrative." By contrast, the Institute counsellors belonged to a long line of social workers who traded in narrative: they wanted and required compelling and corroborating stories. It begs the question whether, the staff's sympathy notwithstanding, the social work encounter played a role in further traumatizing the already victimized.