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What Women Can Do About Violence

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PMP '68
copy - in Violence

WHAT WOMEN CAN DO ABOUT VIOLENCE

The McCall Corporation's Womanpower in Action Forum, TOWARDS A REDUCTION IN VIOLENCE, was called July 23, 1968, in the aftermath of Robert Kennedy's assassination. McCall's had assembled a distinguished group of speakers and panelists at the Brotherhood in Action Building in New York. From what the participants (with one exception) contributed, they seemed to be fully worthy of the unusually good speakers.

The point of departure of the afternoon-evening-and-morning conference was "A letter from the editors of McCall's to the readers which had appeared in the July issue. It characterized violence as a contagion and suggested that the attack on violence must be basic, knowledgeable and thorough. The editorial called on women to see that US policy makers move mightily within the United Nations," work for gun control "stop the outpouring of violence and sordidness on our television screens and in the motion picture theatres," boycott toys that foster and glorify killing, and work for world law and "a strengthened UN."

In his welcoming remarks McCall Corporation President Henry E. Bowes, said that "the media must develop advocacy or the only message the public will be getting is violence." He introduced Federal Communications Commissioner Nicholas Johnson who talked off-the-record on how to make social action effective.

Broadcasters, he said, are public officials elected every three years when the FCC renews their licenses. The law provides that they must represent the public interest, have the obligation to serve the community in its totality. He urged women to monitor stations and complain to the FCC if they are found not to be serving the needs of the community.

Other addresses included that by Coretta King which was the one she had given at the March in Washington in which she called on women to become sensitive to the violence of racism, poverty and war.

Norman Cousins suggested that people in public office increasingly depend on consensus before they take action and called for support of gun control legislation and of the non-proliferation treaty. If we can't bring hand guns under control, he said, how can we control the 12,000 pounds of destructive force available to us for each human being? But in the attempt to cope, he said, the US must not become a police state in the process.

In calling for gun control, Attorney General Ramsay Clark spoke of the many faces of crime, including "white collar crime" One price-fixing conspiracy, he said, can exceed in dollars all other crime. He thought we need to concentrate in three areas: upgrading the police (1/4 to 1/3 in the major cities do not have a junior high school education); correction (four of five crimes are committed by previous offenders), and work with youth (adult crime has not increased). History says, he summarized, that there can be neither order or justice unless you have both.

In the workshop on Violence and the American Tradition Professor Eric Goldman of Princeton pointed out that our history is the attempt of excluded persons to get into the egalitarian system. Only women, he said, who had no rights, were able to get in without violence. Only they, by efficient organization and persistence, were able to make an enormous social change without violence. Goldman encouraged them to continue.

The group dealing with The Urban Crisis recommended stricter narcotics control, listening to the cries from the ghetto, opening the unions to fair employment, that women should serve as fair housing pioneers and the Kerner report should be the Bible for Americans for several years.

The Psychobiology of Violence discussants emphasized the effect of the environment, suggesting the importance of the fact that at birth only 5% of the human brain's neurons are developed; 95% develop after birth. Most of our activity in this country is toward creating better material, not better humans, they noted, and that the process should be reversed.

Margaret Mead was to listen for most of the sessions, then give her thoughts. Of particular interest to women's organizations may be her observation that we are not feeling the impact of organized women-power as much as we used to. The social system will work only if it is pushed and pumped by voluntary groups, she said. Then she asked why aren't women's organizations making themselves felt. She suggested that possibly the organizations are too big and not suitable for work in an emergency. She thought they should be used as a framework for a climate of trust within which ad hoc groups can be formed to deal with specifics; as the system has become more cumbersome from inside, they can do more in concert with others outside.

Margaret Mead, like Professor Goldman, made the distinction between violence against property and against persons. There is a difference, she said, "between the out groups who make themselves felt through violence against property and the in groups who commit violence against persons." We waste property in every conceivable way, she said, but we still punish people who damage it." In the South Seas, she remarked, the family who has only one pot to cook its food does not have to punish the children who break them now because they are no longer made of clay. In this connection she told a touching story of a conversation with some Pacific islanders whom she had not seen since the war brought the Americans.

Surprisingly they told her that they had learned from the American Army that nothing is as important as human life and human well-being. They observed that the Americans would expend any amount of property to save one life.

The conference closed with a session at which a resolution was proposed urging an attack on sin. A continuing secretariat was recommended, to be directed by a lady whom Mr. Cousins appointed on the spot, and who seemed something less than eager.