

Violence against women has historically been shrouded in **silence**.

It was rarely discussed in public, as families, neighbours, churches, and communities attempted to handle such violence in private, behind closed doors. People often knew when women were in danger. However, in the case of domestic abuse, according to church and state, the bond of marriage was to be upheld at all costs.

In 1985, social policy researcher, Jan Pahl, noted that the tradition of accepting violence against women is longer than the tradition of deploring it.

This widespread social acceptance has historically positioned women as targets of violence, from family members, friends, and strangers. It has positioned women to live in constant fear of violence, even in the most seemingly mundane situations. And it has also positioned women to transcend violence and the fear of violence and to assist other women with the same.

Today, in 2021, there are increasing calls for men to hold themselves accountable for their violent behaviour and for society to hold them accountable. There is increasing condemnation for victim-blaming and the gendered dismissal and defence of violent behaviour, a social framing of violence against women that has been accepted and embedded in society for centuries.

However, despite this growing awareness, men continue to commit acts of sexual and physical violence against women and girls and some sectors of society continue to ignore, dismiss, and/or defend such acts.

And yet, women continue to **survive** and push for change.

In 1921, women in St. John's who experienced violence had limited options for assistance, safety, or redress. They tended to rely on informal strategies for survival – mostly in the form of help from family, friends, and neighbours.

And middle-class moral reformers and charitable movements often attacked social issues like violence against women as problems of families, often affiliated with alcohol. Middle-class reformers, and indeed the St. John's suffragists, attempted to decrease the incidents of violence against women by promoting the abstinence of alcohol – the Temperance Movement.



A red dress in honour of **Chantel John**, Glenwood NL, 15 January 2020.

The information and Complaint of St. John's.
taken upon oath at St. John's aforesaid, before the undersigned Stipendiary Magistrate for the Colony of Newfoundland and its Dependencies, and the said Complaint saith
I am the wife of James Bishop. During the past week my husband deserted me and I am in danger of destitution. I have seven children & no means of support.
I pray a ^{revert} ~~revert~~ for the said James Bishop.

**I AM THE WIFE OF
JAMES BISHOP.
DURING THE PAST
WEEK MY HUSBAND
DESERTED ME AND I
AM IN DANGER OF
DESTITUTION. I HAVE
SEVEN CHILDREN
AND NO MEANS OF
SUPPORT.**

I AM A SINGLE WOMAN. I AM NOW WITH CHILD. I AM 14 YEARS OLD.

Beyond informal strategies and wider middle-class reform, women could – and did – take legal action.

Legally, men were held responsible for supporting their wives and their children, both legitimate and illegitimate.

The church and state attempted first and foremost to maintain the family unit: divorce and separation were discouraged.

of *St. John's*.
taken upon oath at St. John's aforesaid, before the undersigned Stipendiary Magistrate
for the Colony of Newfoundland and its Dependencies, and the said Complaint saith
I am a single woman. I am now with child. I had my last monthly sickness in October. One William Lake, Gower St. St. John's is the father of my child. He had sexual intercourse with me in October & again in February. I pray a warrant for the arrest of the said William Lake.



However, women could approach welfare officers and file complaints with the Magistrate for help with abusive or neglectful husbands.

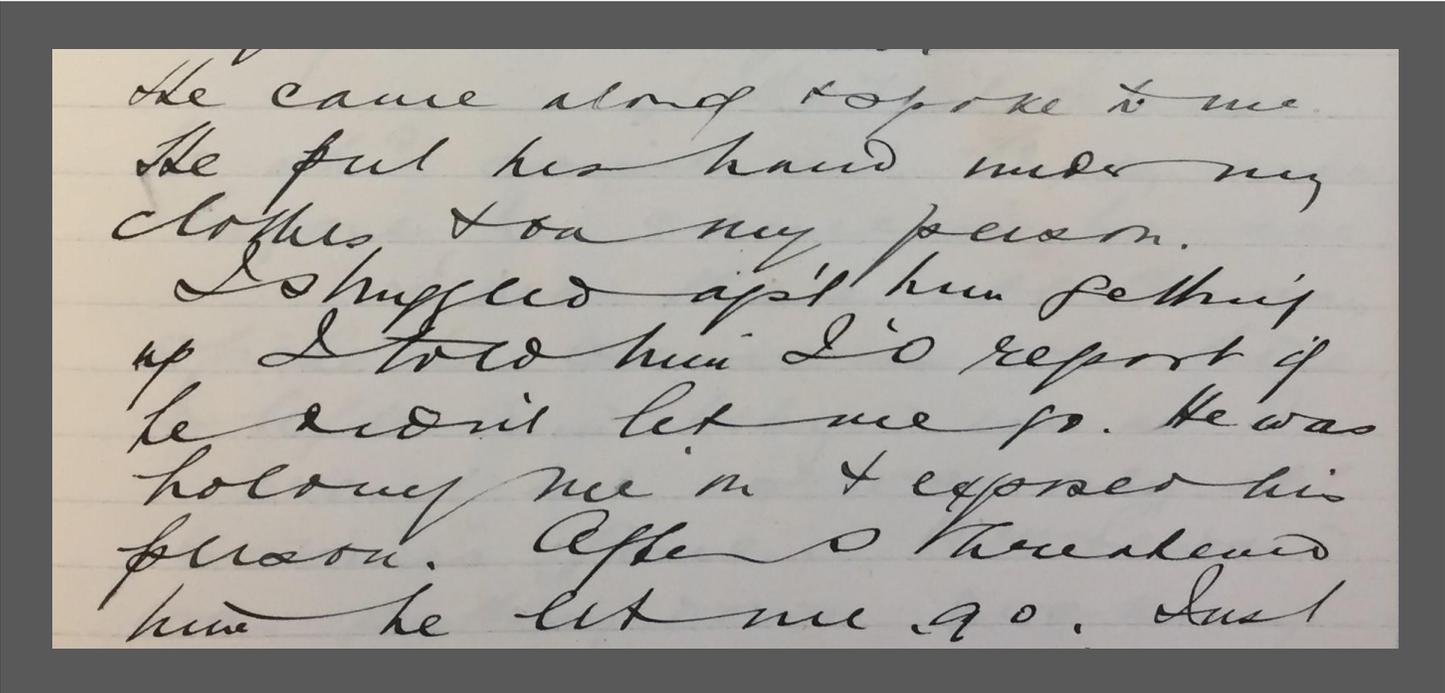
Single women sought state aid in holding men responsible when they became pregnant.

taken upon oath at St. John's aforesaid, before the undersigned Stipendiary Magistrate
for the Colony of Newfoundland and its Dependencies, and the said Complaint saith
I am the wife of Louis Dannel. By the past week he has neglected his children and has been constantly drunk, and ill treating me by every night, and layure in the presence of my four of my children. I pray a summons for Louis

of *St. John's*.
taken upon oath at St. John's aforesaid, before the undersigned Stipendiary Magistrate
for the Colony of Newfoundland and its Dependencies, and the said Complaint saith
I am the wife of Azariah Ferguson. I have four children. My husband by his conduct has compelled myself & my children to leave the house. I have some interest in my husbands house which is subject to a heavy mortgage. Three of my children are under sixteen years of age and without means of support. I pray a summons for the said Azariah Ferguson.

Although the silence surrounding violence against women made the task of finding visual representations of this topic difficult, the Records of the Magistrate Court are filled with petitions from women seeking legal assistance in holding men accountable for their abusive, neglectful, and violent actions.

It is here within the Magistrate Records that we find the voices of these women, their determination, their courage, and their survival.



He came along & spoke to me.
He put his hand under my
clothes, & on my person.
I struggled a bit, but getting
up I told him I'd report if
he didn't let me go. He was
holding me in & exposed his
person. After I threatened
him he let me go. Just

“I told him I’d report if he didn’t let me go.”*

Heidi Coombs

In the spring of 1914, Jane H. was boarding in St. John’s at the home of George D. and his wife on Notre Dame Street. Jane was a married woman, but her husband was disabled and living with his mother at Battle Harbour. Three of her children were at the International Grenfell Association orphanage in St. Anthony. Jane had been working in St. John’s since the fall of 1913.

On Thursday, May 28th, Thomas S. entered the house while Jane was there alone with her baby, and he raped her. George arrived home shortly after the attack. He “saw her down hearted,” whereupon she told him what happened and then reported the attack to the police.

The case was heard by the Magistrate in St. John’s. Jane’s statement was brief – she explained that: “[Thomas] came along and spoke to me. He put his hand under my clothes and on my person. I struggled against him getting up. I told him I’d report if he didn’t let me go. He was holding me in and exposed his person.”

George also testified and confirmed Jane’s statement. He knew Thomas and thought it strange that he came by the house, since he had only been there once before. About the attack, he stated: “...she told me the man knocked her down on the floor and pulled up her clothes and did what he wanted to do with her.”

During the trial, the defense called Jane’s character into question. Thomas stated that George said he had been with her three times that week. However, George denied this. He confirmed that there were “2 fellows” at the door almost every night during the past week,

“and one night she was out till nearly 12 o’clock.” But he clarified, “She don’t be out every night. I know the girl to be decent.”

Thomas was found guilty of the rape and served time at the Penitentiary.

This rape case from 1914 demonstrates similar themes to recent high-profile sexual assault cases in Canada, especially in terms of the propensity of the defence to question the character of the woman involved. In Jane’s case, it is not insignificant that she had the unwavering support of another man – a man who was willing to dispute the other man’s false statement. Men have been in the past, and are today, important allies for women, for justice, and for challenging the patriarchal structure of our institutions.

Despite significant headway in uncovering women’s experiences in Newfoundland and Labrador history, giving voice to those women remains a challenge. As Linda Cullum, Maeve Baird, and Cynthia Penney have pointed out, the patriarchal structure of society and its institutions has historically meant that women were represented “in narrow and limited ways, often with little input from themselves.”

Although we only have access to her statement in the form of court minutes, Jane’s “voice” from May 1914 rings out. Her courage to report the crime – as a woman alone in St. John’s, with a disabled husband and her children living hundreds of miles away – is an inspiration and a testament to the strength of women throughout history.

- All trial statements from The Rooms Provincial Archives, GN 5-3-A-1, Magistrates Court, Central Circuit, Minutes, Box 211.

- Linda Cullum and Maeve Baird, with the assistance of Cynthia Penny, “A Woman’s Lot: Women and Law in Newfoundland from Early Settlement to the Twentieth Century,” in Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives on Women in Newfoundland and Labrador, Linda Kealey, ed., (St. John’s: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1993), p. 67.

*A Woman’s Almanac: 2019, (St. John’s: Breakwater Books, 2019).