

## **Saying Yes; Power and Permission**

by **Robert Hahn, President, Men Stopping Violence Board of Directors**

While abusive public rituals such as the "Tailhook" convention may be a common tradition in U.S. society, they have recently become less publicly acceptable. The growing intolerance of violence against women in the form of (hetero)sexual harassment and date rape has led to the development of manuals of appropriate behavior. Rules and guidelines are being formulated in schools and colleges, in private organizations, in the military, and in federal, state, and local governmental agencies. Rules may be accompanied by sanctions and programs of enforcement.

These efforts raise a basic question: what does it mean for a woman in our society to say "yes." If a woman's "yes" simply means that permission is freely granted, then the preparation of guidelines and sanctions and their enforcement may be an appropriate response to harassment, assault, and rape. If, however, "yes" need not signify free consent, then such guidelines will be ineffective in preventing abuse, or, worse, they may facilitate abuse by erroneously presuming to have controlled it.

I propose that the meaning of "yes" in our society is different when uttered by a woman than when uttered by a man. The difference is that, because of the widespread and often unsanctioned violence of men against women, a woman's speech may not be free. To say "yes" under threat is not to freely give permission.

I am not saying that I believe that all women constantly and consciously experience the threat of male violence, but that this threat is often in the background, if not the foreground of daily life. Women are not equally free to move in time, space, or activity. Violence or its threat may be verbal or gestural; it may involve money or other forms of control; it is ultimately based in force. Sometimes silenced by violence itself, violence is often hidden and unspoken. The reality of violence may be taken for granted. But we are frequently reminded of violence against women in news media and the arts, if not in our own experience or that of our acquaintances. If it happens to someone else and goes unpunished, it can happen to me.

Given the background of the routinized and sanctioned male violence against women in our society, this background should be presumed present unless there is evidence that in specific instances, a given relationship is exempt, protected from the normal threats. Thus, for a man to establish a relationship with a woman in which consent is a possibility, he must make the context of interaction a domination-free, voluntary zone. The challenge is not to gain a woman's consent for each touching or sexual gesture, but to create and maintain an environment in which consent or denial are not threatened by violence. It is only in such a setting that consent becomes meaningful. This requires a commitment not to use violence and to resist common male methods of control. Commitment must be genuine and sincerely communicated. It may or may not be accepted; it may be accepted cautiously and tentatively.

Steps toward eliminating the oppression of women in our society should be welcomed and applauded. It must be recognized, however, that efforts which address only the immediate interaction of individuals are likely to fail because the broad societal context in which oppression is silently accepted is left untouched.