

Compassion should be shared across genders
by Lloyd Robertson

By now almost everyone has an opinion about Robert Latimer, the Saskatchewan farmer who killed his 12 year old severely disabled daughter. Most people have agreed with the jury: Latimer was guilty of murder but he should be shown compassion and given a lesser sentence. Advocates for the disabled have argued vigorously that a lesser sentence would somehow devalue the life of all who suffer from disabilities. They agree with the judges who gave Latimer life imprisonment.

In my last column I wrote about ten year old Katie Lynn Baker who suffered from Rett Syndrome and who was murdered by her mother two years ago. Some La Ronge residents have wondered why Cheryl Baker was not even charged given what happened to Latimer.

A Montreal RettS girl was murdered while I was preparing for this spring's RettS conference in Winnipeg. After being helped off her school bus Chelsea Craig was given a drug overdose by her mother. Rachel Craig has been charged but we do not yet know the outcome. The crime, however, has not been given the same attention as Latimer's crime by advocates for the disabled.

In 1996 another Montreal woman, Danielle Blais, drowned her six year old autistic boy in a bathtub. She was charged, convicted and given a 23 month suspended sentence. Advocates for the disabled did not feel this light sentence devalued the lives of disabled. In fact, Blais was given a job with the Quebec Society for Autistic Children.

In 1997 a Toronto woman, Renee Heikamp, simply stopped feeding her baby. At age 35 days Jordon Heikamp died. A coroner's inquest determined that a homicide had taken place but a court was unable to determine who was responsible: Heikamp, Catholic Family Services, or the women's shelter where Heikamp stayed. No one was convicted.

The feminist viewpoint, that society is misogynist or "female hating" is not supported by how we treat women who kill their children. A society that hates women is not likely to treat female murderers with more compassion than it treats men who do the same deed. This is not to say the feminists are wrong about society being sexist.

The European Christian tradition, which we have inherited, held that women were more nurturing, less capable, and more easily led than men. As a result women were not allowed to own property or vote. Led by the suffragette movement in the first half of the 20th century women gained the vote and the right to property. But the attitude that women are essentially non-violent and when they do commit violence are usually not responsible has remained. Not too surprisingly, feminists have supported this form of sexism.

The refusal by Statistics Canada to record female domestic violence, the refusal by some researchers to publish results showing that female domestic violence equals that of men and the refusal by the courts to hold women responsible for murder to the same level as men are all evidence of this continued sexism. But equality demands that women be held just as responsible as men. We can begin by examining our own attitudes.

When we hear of a woman physically attacking a man, do we assume that the man must have done something to deserve it? Do we laugh off female violence? When child abuse occurs, do we assume the father was the more likely culprit? Do we show as much sympathy for men as we do for women in the same circumstance? To quote John Lennon, do we assume that only women bleed?

Compassion is an admirable emotion but, in our society, it is not distributed equally. When Laura and Robert Latimer decided to kill their daughter who was in a vegetative state and in great pain they made a crucial tactical mistake. Had Laura Latimer done the deed she would have been treated with more compassion than was shown her husband. Come to think of it, she was never charged with being an accessory to the crime was she?