

CFUW TALK for Luke's Place
Durham Region, January 14th, 7:15 p.m.

I want to talk to you this evening about some of the work we do at Luke's Place, but I think it is important to set that work in a broader context, so let me make a few remarks first about the reality of violence against women in this country.

As you all know, this past December 6th marked the 25th anniversary of the Montreal Massacre.

Twenty five years since 14 women were gunned down for no reason other than being women.

Twenty five years since this country was shocked and horrified; since governments and individuals alike said – never again.

And yet, one woman is killed every six days in Canada by men who claim to love them. By men who think they are justified; who think they are entitled; who think they deserve to wield that kind of power and control.

And yet, thousands more women are battered and beaten and emotionally abused. More still are routinely threatened with physical harm. Others are financially imprisoned and socially isolated to the extent that they know there is no point in even trying to escape. Some decide to stay with their abuser because it really is safer than any other option.

It is a war on women, and one that does not appear to be coming to an end.

Despite the numbers, despite what we all know to be true, women are still disbelieved, punished and silenced when we tell our stories of violence, whether we tell those stories to our families, friends, the police, in criminal court, in family court, on social media.

Rebecca Solnit talks about the silencing of women in a recent Harper's magazine essay. Let's think about her remarks in the context of the past few months – the Jian Ghomeshi and Bill Cosby revelations, the suspension of two MPs and the suspension of two players in the OHL. She says:

“Not uncommonly, when a woman says something that impugns a man, particularly a powerful one, . . . or an institution, especially if it has to do with sex, the response will be to question not just the facts of her assertion but her capacity to speak and her right

to do so. Generations of women have been told they are delusional, confused, manipulative, malicious, conspiratorial, congenitally dishonest, often all at once.”

She describes silence as having three concentric circles, each of which reinforces the other.

“First come the internal inhibitions, self-doubts, repressions, confusions and shame that make it difficult to impossible to speak, along with the fear of being punished or ostracized for doing so. . . . Surrounding this circle are the forces who attempt to silence someone who speaks up anyway, whether by humiliating or bullying or outright violence, including violence unto death. Finally, in the outermost ring, when the story has been told and the speaker has not been silenced directly, tale and teller are discredited.”

As Judith Hermann (Trauma and Recovery) says: “Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens After each atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: It never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.”

Writing about the Jian Ghomeshi story, Heather Mallick said in the Toronto Star:

“[This incident] has revealed the huge spiked metal barriers women still face – even now in times we call modern – when they speak out about the hideous things that have been done to them. . . . When it comes to redress for suffering a sexual assault, Canadian women might as well be in Saudi Arabia. We whisper quietly among friends and quietly trade stories or we shut up for our entire careers. The barriers start with institutional sexism and pile on with the almost impossible burden of proof for acts committed in private, the adulation offered to well-paid and well-connected men When you read the violence, mockery and hate handed out to the unnamed women online who were already too scared to call the police, you might think feminism had never been invented.”

November 11 is a national day to remember those who have been killed in military wars. Military war is a terrible thing, and the death of every soldier deserves notice.

But these soldiers were going to work. They had signed on for jobs and careers they knew carried a significant risk of injury or death.

When women get married, they are not signing on for a life-threatening career. However, given the statistics, it is no exaggeration to say that many women live in a war zone where every day survived becomes a battle victory. These women, who spend every day of their lives trying to outwit the enemy, stay one step ahead of him, protect the children, stay alive for just one more day, are heroes as much as any soldier serving in a military war.

And yet, these women, when they are killed, do not warrant an honour guard or the presence of the Prime Minister at their funerals, do not warrant the naming of a highway to honour their sacrifice, do not garner front page news coverage for more than a day or two.

So what does any of this have to do with Luke's Place? Well, let me tell you.

When women leave abusive relationships, especially women with children, they almost always have family law issues to resolve. Unfortunately, for many of these women, rather than providing the support and safety they are looking for, family law and family court prove to be just another battleground in the war on women.

They are confronted with a legal and court system that wants to believe all families separate in a civilized and respectful way; that pretends violence does not exist; that does not understand that violence usually continues after separation.

About 70% of them find out that they will have to handle their family court case on their own because, while they cannot afford a lawyer, they also do not qualify to receive assistance from legal aid.

A significant number of them discover quickly that the family court process will allow their abuser will use the weapon of legal bullying to continue intimidating and harassing them.

And, they will find that, by and large, the family court system and the people in that system – lawyers, judges, mediators and others – will not understand that years of abuse leads to trauma, which then affects their ability to engage effectively with the court process.

Many of them will walk out of the family court system with joint custody orders that require them to have an ongoing relationship with their abuser. Others will accept financial outcomes that are less than they are entitled to under the law because they cannot afford – financially or emotionally – to continue with their case.

Too few will receive the emergency restraining and custody orders that the circumstances of their situation warrant.

At Luke's Place, our job is to support women to offset some of the impact of these realities.

We provide that support through a number of unique programs and services, which I will describe in just a minute, but first let me tell you that Luke's Place is the first organization of its kind in Canada. We are not a shelter, we are not a community counselling agency: we exist for the sole purpose of providing family court support to women who have left abusive relationships and, more recently, of providing support to other organizations assisting women in a similar way.

This singular focus has allowed us to develop an expertise that women cannot find elsewhere. It is an expertise that is desperately needed, as we see from the number of women seeking our support and from the number of requests we get from organizations across Ontario that want us to share our model with them.

We offer a variety of programs and services to women:

- Our Early Information Sessions provide women with an opportunity to obtain basic information about family law and family court process as well as safety planning
- Legal Information Workshops on 4 topics are delivered by pro-bono lawyers and LSWs to women at any stage in their family court case
- Women receive individual support by working with one of our Legal Support Workers/ FCSWs, who provide them with emotional support, safety planning, information about family law and family court process, assistance with document completion, court accompaniment and debriefing support as well as with referrals to other services when the woman requires them
- Luke's Place also delivers legal services through our pro bono legal clinic, in which lawyers in the community offer their services at no cost to our clients. Women who have left an abusive relationship, are involved with family court and do not have legal representation can obtain information about family court process as well as a legal opinion about their case based on the facts they share with the lawyer. They can also have their court documents reviewed. The Clinic

brings a team approach, with both a lawyer and a Legal Support Worker participating in the appointment with the woman. The LSW debriefs with the woman following the appointment and provides ongoing support after she has obtained the lawyer's summary advice

- Our Family Law Networking Group (FLNG) is a peer support group for women who have left an abusive relationship, are or may become involved with family court and are looking for ongoing support.

We have just embarked on an exciting new project with funding from Legal Aid Ontario. Luke's Place has partnered with the new Durham Family Law Service Centre to identify women survivors of violence and to streamline them into specialized support services at Luke's Place - a project that we hope will become a model across the province.

Our training work across the province is well established. As well as offering training to organizations on a fee for service basis, we have recently completed a 3-year project funded by Status of Women Canada that allowed us to offer family court support training to more than 300 frontline workers in 10 communities across Ontario. We provide training and ongoing legal support to Ontario's Family Court Support Workers. And, most recently, we have begun training on domestic violence for all Legal Aid Ontario staff to increase their awareness and skill levels.

Our frontline work lets us see how the law and court processes play out in the real world for the women we support and so we have become law reform advocates as well. Through the work of Luke's Place and other VAW organizations across the province, we have contributed to important and positive changes for women leaving abusive relationships. For example:

- Increased LAO funding for certificates
- Education for LAO staff
- Changes to restraining order legislation
- Changes to best interests of the child test to require consideration of violence within the family
- The establishment of the FCSW program

Our work can, at times, be overwhelming. We can and do feel the despair of the women we support. We can and do feel anger at a family court system that does not seem to understand the nuanced reality of violence within the family. We can and do tire of the never-ending struggle to find resources to support our work.

However, we always remind ourselves that Luke's Place would not exist if a group of people in Durham Region had not dared to imagine. And that is what I want to encourage all of you to do tonight.

I want you to think about the women we support at Luke's Place. Then I want you to dare to imagine something that seems, perhaps, unimaginable: a day without violence, a week without violence, a lifetime without violence, a world without violence.

And then I want you to think about what your role in helping us achieve that goal might be, because we DO need your support.

Of course, we need financial support, and donations of any kind of keenly appreciated. But there are other important roles you can play, too: we are always looking for new, enthusiastic Board members to join the dedicated women already serving on our Board, and volunteers – both in the office and providing direct support to women – are critical to our work.

Let's go back to the vision of a world free from violence. I won't lie to you: There will be plenty of days when holding on to that vision will seem ridiculous. Here are some examples:

When I read about the misogynist behaviour of some of the male dentistry students at Dalhousie University and the inadequate and inappropriate response by the university administration, I wondered if we had made any progress at all. But then I read about the women students demanding more for themselves and the faculty supporting them, and I felt more positive.

When I watched the media try to blame Jayney Palmer for being beaten unconscious by her then fiancé Ray Rice, I despaired.

But then I read Margaret Wente and Leah McLaren, Globe and Mail columnists not prone to feminist opinions, who wrote powerfully about why women remain with abusive men and why they should not be blamed or judged for doing so, and I felt hope again.

When I read Denise Balkissoon in the Globe and Mail, with her righteous and important rage, who said that it is useless and thoroughly disappointing for women to report male violence because they are not going to be believed unless they are the "right" sort of women, I wanted to give up.

But then I read Owen Pallett, a musician and friend of Jian Ghomshi:

“At no point here will I ever give my friend Jian’s version of the truth more credence than the version of the truth offered up by three women. Anonymity does not mean these women do not exist. . . . Let’s be clear. Whether the court decides that predatory men are punished or exonerated does not silence the voices of the victims. It does not make victims liars. Whether our culture continues to celebrate the works of predatory men is another issue. It does not silence the voices of the victims.”

And I was ready to keep working.

When I saw that the Miss America pageant was still alive and well in 2014, with women being awarded prizes and scholarships based largely on their appearance, I sighed.

But then I listened to the new Miss America who declared that she is a survivor of dating violence and wants to make domestic violence the issue she champions during her reign, and I smiled.

When I see the many ways in which the internet continues to objectify and sexualize women, I worry about the future of my 4 grandsons.

But then I see a YouTube video by a young man (17 years old) insisting that YouTubers hold one another accountable for online sexual assault, and I think maybe it will be okay.

When I hear the backlash to Emma Watson’s powerful call to boys and men to join with girls and women in working for women’s equality – backlash that called her every offensive misogynist name you can think of – I wonder what on earth we have all come to.

But then, I remember the final words of her speech. Emma Watson, hero to so many of my grandsons’ generation for her role as Hermione in the Harry Potter films, said, to those who are hesitant to join in the fight for women’s equality: “If not me, who? And if not now, when?” and I am inspired.

When I see a federal government that again and again denies the reality of women’s inequality in this country, cuts funding to women’s equality research and advocacy organizations, refuses to establish an Inquiry into murdered and missing Aboriginal women, I am angry beyond what words can express.

But then, when I hear the leaders of the other two main parties talk with passion about their commitment to women’s rights; when one of those leaders goes so far as to say

members of his caucus will be required to vote pro-choice regardless of their personal beliefs, when that leader moves quickly to address allegations of sexual harassment against members of his caucus, I can move beyond my anger to action once more.

In 1941, Wonder Woman debuted. The press release announcing her arrival on the scene of super heroes said, in part: “Wonder Woman was conceived to set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and professions monopolized by men because the only hope for civilization is the greater freedom, development and equality of women in all fields of human activity.”

We may not have exactly achieved the goal so ambitiously set out by the creators of Wonder Woman all those years ago, which is why we need Luke’s Place, sexual assault centres, women’s shelters, women’s advocacy organizations, and a government that is committed to women’s equality.

Much work has been done to end violence against women. Much remains to be done.

Please consider supporting the work we do at Luke’s Place. And, when you leave here tonight, ask yourself, as Emma Watson encouraged:

“If not me, who? And if not now, when?”