

DECEMBER 6, 2012
LINDSAY VIGIL

Speaking notes

December 6, 1989: I used to be able to say this date and know that everyone in the room, like me, could instantly remember where they were and what they were doing on that date.

Increasingly, I find myself in rooms with people who were not even alive on December 6, 1989 or, if they were, were too young to have their own memory of what is for many of us a pivotal moment in our lives.

Twenty three years since Marc Lepine, blaming feminists, shot and killed 14 women at l'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal.

Twenty three years since feminist students at Queen's University, including me, insisted that the university hold male students accountable for their response to a campus anti-rape campaign, which included plastering messages such as "No Means Harder," "No Means More Beer," and "No Means Down on Your Knees Bitch" on residence windows and elsewhere around the campus.

Twenty three years since my daughter, 15 at the time, accompanied me into an occupation of the principal's office that was part of that campaign because she already knew that her life would be different than her brother's because and only because she was a girl, and she wanted the university she might attend in the future to understand that and make itself a safe and welcoming place for her and for other young women.

Twenty three years: time for my daughter to grow up and have children of her own: 2 boys who are 11 and 7 years old now and who live in a world where, sadly, misogyny and violence against women still thrive and where little boys who don't want to play super hero or sports are called sissy and much, much worse.

You, like me, have come here today because you want to commemorate and honour the women whose lives Marc Lepine ended so abruptly on this day in 1989 and the more than 500 women and children killed in Ontario by men in the 23 years since then.

Regardless of our personal connection with December 6, 1989 – whether we remember it as though it were yesterday or it is something we have learned about from others – we are here because we know we still have work to do to end violence against women and we want to be part of that work.

In 1989 in Canada, violence against women was out of the closet. We had come some distance since 1982, when Margaret Mitchell introduced the topic in the House of Commons and was greeted with laughs and jeers and the well-known comment by one MP to another: “I don't beat my wife. Do you?”

By 1989, shelters and rape crisis centres existed and provided important support to women who had experienced violence and were able to reach out for help. Governments had begun to respond to the issue of violence against women with law reform and policy development to address the issue. For example, mandatory charging practices had been implemented across the

country, which removed the responsibility for deciding whether or not charges should be laid from women's shoulders and placed it with the police.

Revisions to the Criminal Code in 1983 redefined rape, criminalized marital rape and introduced some important concepts about consent, laying the groundwork for the many community-based "no means no" campaigns that followed.

But, despite moving violence against women into a public forum and despite a Charter of Rights and Freedoms that offered women formal equality before and under the law, violence against women remained a serious social problem and a daily reality for far too many women in this country.

Here are just a couple of examples:

- In 1989, women experienced serious and ongoing psychological abuse by their partners and former partners in the form of stalking. When they reported this to the police, many of whom were as frustrated by the situation as the women, they were told: "There is nothing we can do until he assaults you" because stalking was not illegal in Canada at that time.
- Women who reported sexual violence to the police, despite the changes to the law, could almost certainly expect to confront rape myths and stereotypes: women were to blame for being raped because they dressed provocatively, were in a bad part of town, were drunk or otherwise intoxicated,

were sex workers, and on and on the list went and, unfortunately, still goes.

- Their private records were not protected from disclosure during criminal proceedings, meaning their therapy and other records could wind up in the hands of their abuser.
- Women who spoke out about violence against women, as in the Queen's story to which I referred earlier, were mocked, attacked and derided.

Despite this, in 1989, as now, the violence against women movement was strong, vibrant and loud across the country and, increasingly, around the world.

We brought then, as we do now, a gendered understanding of violence against women, insisting that appropriate solutions would only be found if the problem itself were properly identified and understood.

Then, as now, we situated violence against women within the reality of women's ongoing inequality and, in particular, women's poverty.

By 1989, we were beginning to understand the intersectionality of violence against women; the differential impact of violence on women from different communities; the need for a response to violence that understood this intersectionality and difference. And we knew we needed to understand more and do our work better.

By speaking loudly, by staying strong and vibrant, and by working collaboratively across our differences and with committed allies within governments at all levels, we were able to effect important changes. Among them:

- Stalking was criminalized as the offence of criminal harassment
- Amendments to the Criminal Code were passed and later upheld by the Supreme Court that protect the privacy of women's records in criminal sexual assault proceedings
- Family law was changed so that the test to determine custody and access had to consider violence within the family
- Restraining order legislation was reformed to strengthen the enforcement of orders and hold abusers more accountable for their actions
- The law and rules relating to the arbitration of family law matters were changed to protect some of the most vulnerable women in our communities by requiring that arbitration use only the family law of Ontario or Canada
- The provincial government introduced a Domestic Violence Action Plan and a Sexual Violence Action Plan, in which it made serious commitments, to moving forward to end violence against women

We did this work together – activists, frontline workers, politicians, government and institutional players, police, lawyers, doctors, and others.

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So, are we there yet? Have we succeeded in our work to end violence against women? Can we move on to something else?

Clearly, no. The fact that Ontario has 171 shelters that, in 2010, supported more than 19,000 abused women and their children, is proof enough, but there are other indicators too.

Approximately one woman a week is killed by her partner or former partner in Canada. Women and their children continue to live in poverty in one of the wealthiest countries in the world. Sexual violence against young women remains at a shockingly high level. Funding for women's services is never enough. Government policies, especially in the areas of immigration, criminal and family law, are not helpful enough and, sometimes, even make things worse.

While politicians and most of the rest of society know better than to laugh when the issue of violence against women is raised, sexist jokes continue to find favour in many social settings and too few of us, women and men, confront those jokes.

Most importantly, perhaps, we, as a society, still deny the reality of violence against women. We want to use language like "domestic violence," to pretend that violence in intimate relationships is a roughly equal two-way street, that women make up or exaggerate claims of sexual violence, that women's experience of violence throughout their lives is not unique and not the result of misogyny. Why? Because it is easier, plain and simple.

What do we do next? I have a few suggestions.

We need to address the myth I just identified: the myth that violence is gender neutral. If we do not do this, we will never end violence because we won't be addressing the real problem.

We need to continue to expand our understanding of the intersectional realities of violence against women, understanding that women's experiences of violence are different depending on things like their race, immigration status in Canada, geographic location, ability/disability and so on. We need also to better understand and acknowledge the many forms violence can take for women.

We need to engage men in this work more than we have in the past. Not so they can come in and take over; but because it is men who are the abusers, and those who are not must speak out and hold their brothers, fathers, sons, co-workers, classmates, and bosses accountable for their behaviour when they abuse. They must challenge sexist jokes and inequality in their workplaces or classrooms and examine their own role in benefiting from the privilege of being male.

We also need to engage young women in the work. The VAW movement, in fact, the feminist movement as a whole has not done a particularly good job of this, and we need to do better. This means that those of us who are older need to understand the new world inhabited by young women and men – the world of Facebook, twitter and other social media, a world where privacy, gender and gendered-violence have taken on new meanings, a

world where violence against women has taken on forms we never could have imagined.

I hardly have to tell you about the suicide of 15-year-old Amanda Todd earlier this fall. Both mainstream and social media have covered her death and the events leading up to it in considerable detail.

However, what the media and most conversations about Amanda Todd have not done is to talk about her as a victim of systemic male violence. Instead, her story has been added to the long list of tragic stories – many with endings as sad as hers – that are attributed to online bullying.

Online bullying is a terrible thing. It is important to find ways to shut it down. Certainly, the extent of harm caused to Amanda Todd had much to do with the ability to disseminate pictures and stories quickly, easily and anonymously provided by social media.

However, the journey Amanda took to her decision to end her life begins with an act that is distinctly one of violence against women – victimization by a man who blackmailed her by threatening to share a topless photo of her if she did not do what he wanted and who then followed through on that threat.

Engaging young women means making room to be inspired by their stories and ideas. Be inspired, for instance, by Jessica Valenti, a feminist who is young compared to me but thinks she is too old to call herself young. Her enthusiasm for feminism and what it offers is truly awe-inspiring. Here are a few words from her

book *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Woman's Guide to Why Feminism Matters*:

“(f)eminism is a pretty amazing thing. When you’re a feminist, day-to-day life is better. You make better decisions. You have better sex. You understand the struggles you’re up against and how to best handle them. Feminism has become such an important part of my life. It has changed me for the better and shaped who I am in tremendous ways. I truly believe that feminism makes your life better. Imagine being able to get past all the nonsense that tells you you’re not good enough. To all of a sudden understand why you’ve ever felt not smart enough or not pretty enough. To finally be able to put your finger on that feeling you’ve always had that something is off. ”

We need to stay strong, to remember what happened on December 6, 1989, and what happens to too many women in our communities every day of the year.

To do that, we need to recommit ourselves to working together, even when we have differences, to find the places of commonality among us and to use those to strengthen us individually and in our work.

Let me close with a poem by Marge Piercy from 1980 that never fails to inspire me:

The Low Road

What can they do
to you? Whatever they want.
They can set you up, they can
bust you, they can break
your fingers, they can
burn your brain with
electricity,
blur you with drugs till you
can't walk, can't remember,
they can
take your child, wall up
your lover. They can do
anything
you can't stop them
from doing. How can you
stop them? Alone, you can fight,
you can refuse, you can
take what revenge you can
but they roll over you.

But two people fighting
back to back can cut through
a mob, a snake-dancing file
can break a cordon, an army
can meet an army.

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,

love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fundraising party.
A dozen makes a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter,
ten thousand, power and your own paper,
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no.
It starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.