

Ending Violence Against Women: A Report Card

Women's College Hospital, December 6, 2011

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

Twenty two 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 two 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 two years: time for my daughter to grow up and have children of her own: 2 boys who are 10 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. 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?”

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.

PAUSE

I want to take a moment to share a poem with you; written by a judge in the American family court system because I think it describes eloquently both the reality of the situation of women who experience violence and the reality of the work done by so many to support those women.

The Drama of the Long Distance Runners

By Jacqueline St. John

Dedicated to workers in the battered women's movement

I watch you in the courthouse
coffee shop, sitting next to
the angry young woman,
the one with a newborn
tied to her chest.
Fear and despair
criss-cross her back. You
listen to her insults.
She storms away. You
chase after her,
touch her cold shoulder,
her tears on the brink. You
hand her a card, your
home number on it. Her
link to hope on
some other day
some
other day she calls you,
the lawyer, and tells you her
story, she sets a date for your
meeting, and later you rant about her:
she didn't show up, she
didn't even call. At night you
sip bourbon and seven you
empty your pockets, you
search for change, you

have to know:

Is she safe?

Is she still alive?

On your way home you
check the backseat, look over your
shoulder from your car to your
door. At midnight you
search for keys, you
rattle the kitchen lock one
more time before you
climb the stairs weary
to bed.

I watch you,
her therapist, prepare your
testimony your
expert psychological testimony, you
review all the research, you
draft the report with your
clinical observations, you
substantiate your opinions
bear witness to corroborate her
reality with your colder, calmer
objectivity. You balance her
accounts, reconcile your
perceptions with those of your
science and those of the law.
Sometimes you stare
at the wall and you cry. You
sit there cradling her fate

so carefully in your learned, aging hands.

I swallow the Sunday news
with my coffee: Yet another woman
killed by her husband-who-shot-himself-too.

But
this one,
this client might have been mine,
this one,
had I not been booked up
and had to say no
this one,
had she had the money on Thursday
instead of on Monday,
this one.

I see her dead body
dressed like a bride in a box,
this familiar stranger I
talked to over the phone
once.

This one,
whose Monday appointment I
could now scratch from my book.
We sign the book at the funeral
home for this one,
this precious one.

PAUSE

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 engage men in this work more than they have been 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 to this point, and we need to do better.

We, and by we here I mean the women of my generation, we need to encourage young women to see that feminism is not a dirty word, that women's equality matters, that violence against women can and will affect them, and that they have a responsibility to act.

This means some work for both generations of us. Those of us who are over 50 need to create more space for those who are under 35 who need to leave some room for us, too. We all have something important to contribute to the discussions we need to have and to the work we need to do.

We need to make sure our history is shared. I had an interesting conversation last week with a young woman who is a graduate student at Queen's. She identifies as a feminist, is active in her union and in the community at large on a variety of issues. We were meeting to discuss possible activities at Kingston's 2012 International Women's Week. In the course of our discussion, I brought up the 1989 events at Queen's. She was completely unaware of them – completely. I was astonished and horrified. She was overcome and, ultimately, excited and inspired to hear about what had been going on at Queen's more than 20 years ago.

We need to find a more formal way to ensure that these stories are passed along because they are inspiring.

Many young women are not waiting for us to make room for them and, just as I want to inspire young women with the stories of the work I have been part of, I want to be inspired by their stories. 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, is one such voice. 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. ”

Be inspired by the work of a group of feminist law students who, with the support of the National Association of Women and the Law, have created the Gender and the Law Manual, an online alternative orientation guide to law school that provides feminist and equality seeking law students with hope, encouragement and inspiration as well as with tools to survive law school.

Or be inspired by the work of young women in many other organizations dedicated to ending violence against women.

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. We need to and can take inspiration from the Occupy movement.

Let me close with a poem by Marge Piercy, an activist, novelist and poet, with whom many of you will be familiar (and, for those who are not, I encourage you to check her out). My daughter had

this poem framed for me a few years ago and it hangs on my office wall, facing my poster of Thelma and Louise. Between them, I find my hope and inspiration on even the bleakest day.

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.