

WHITEHORSE DECEMBER 6TH TALK

December 6, 2018

December 6th, 1989 is one of those dates that will stay in the minds of many of us for the rest of our lives. November 22, 1963 and September 11, 2001 are just two others for people of my age, and I am sure there are others for people younger than me.

Next year, it will have been 30 years since Marc Lepine gunned down and killed 14 women, also injuring another 10 women and 4 men, for no reason other than they were women. He blamed feminists for ruining his life.

At the time, those of us who worked for women's equality were horrified that our work to advance women's rights and to end male violence against women could be twisted in this way to justify the largest act of femicide in Canada's history.

Sadly, in the three decades since the Montreal Massacre, we have come to realize that Lepine's twisted thinking is not unique. We now understand that there is a straight and strong line between violence against women and mass killings: the majority of men who commit mass killings have engaged in acts of VAW in the past.

There is no doubt that much has been achieved since this date in 1989. Criminal laws to respond to sexual assault have improved, as have some of the processes women must engage with when they have been sexually assaulted. Some family laws, especially those that deal with custody and access, are better now at acknowledging the reality of violence within families than they were 29 years ago. The Prime Minister calls himself a feminist, has reinstated a strong Status of Women Department and is working with women's equality advocates across the country to develop a gender equality action plan.

But too much remains the same or is getting worse. Sexual assault remains the most under-reported crime in the country. According to the YCWCA Canada, there are approximately 460,000 sexual assaults a year across Canada. Out of every 1,000, only 33 are reported to the police. Of those, 29 are recorded as a crime and charges are laid in 12. Six are prosecuted and three end in a conviction. From 1,000 – 3, just like that. More women have been killed in Canada in acts of femicide this year than ever before. INSERT NUMBER. Most women's shelters are full most of the time, and women stay in those shelters for longer than ever because there is nowhere for them to do.

In Ontario, where I come from, the government elected last June has decided not to implement the gender-based violence plan passed by the previous government; a plan that had been developed in collaboration with community-based violence against women experts. This same government has cut much-needed increases to social assistance, ended rent controls for new construction, frozen the minimum wage and shut down a basic income pilot project that

offered hope to people living in poverty and might have made it possible for more women to leave abusive relationships.

I am just a visitor to Whitehorse and Yukon, but I know you face many of these same challenges. Too many women are living in poverty with little hope of improving their circumstances. The minimum wage here is \$7 lower than a living wage. There is a serious housing shortage.

All of these factors contribute to women's vulnerability to violence. When women are poor, they are more likely to enter and remain in abusive relationships. When women and their children cannot find affordable, safe housing, they return to abusive relationships or risk ongoing exposure to violence in their new location. A minimum wage that is not a living wage exposes the entire family to poverty. When women are not believed when they tell their stories of abuse – whether that is physical, sexual, emotional or other – we stop telling out stories and we don't try to access services and supports.

We need to understand why government policies, programs and services continue to ignore the realities of women's lives, in particular, the violent realities of women's lives. And to understand that, we have to take a step back to look at misogyny and patriarchy.

It's not hard to find: think of the reaction to the courageous Christine Blasey Ford, who spoke out during Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings for the U.S. Supreme Court about his sexual assault of her. He is now a Supreme Court Justice, a very powerful job that can never be taken away from him and, in many circles, is seen as the victim of a vindictive woman. She has had her life threatened, is living in hiding and has been unable to return to her job as a university professor. That's misogyny. That's toxic masculinity.

For women, that toxic masculinity is a constant reminder of how far we have yet to go; a constant reminder of the risk of violence that surrounds us whether we are at home, at school or work or in our community.

But the impact of misogyny goes much farther than that. It makes its way into societal attitudes about women and girls, which in turn impact how the law is interpreted and applied and how government policy is written.

Until we address and end misogyny, our responses to things like violence against women will amount to little more than putting bandaids on wounds that require major surgery. We have to change the structure to change the realities of women's lives.

I realize all of this sounds pretty gloomy, but there is hope, too. Hope that I can see just by who is here tonight. Even after 29 years, even though many of you are not old enough to remember December 6, 1989, you know how important it is to mark this anniversary and so you are here.

I find hope in the work that all of us do to clean up the messes created by the patriarchy: the work done in this community by the Status of Women Council, the Victoria Faulkner Women's Centre, the Women's Transition House ADD INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS.

I find hope in the strength of intergenerational work to advance women's equality: friends of mine – women now in their 70s – who lived in Whitehorse in the 1970s helped start the Women's Minibus Society and other services because of their commitment to women's equality and safety and they remain actively involved in work to support women's rights.

While there is much to do, there is reason to hope. We can "first mourn, then organize."

Whenever I feel myself losing hope, I turn to a poem by Marge Piercy that always inspires me to get back to work, so let me close by sharing it with you: