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FAST FACTS

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Ending Violence Against Women: Understanding the Connections Between Direct and Structural Violence

Sadly, the massacre 18 years ago at École Polytechnique in Montréal was not an isolated occurrence. While we honour the memory of the fourteen women murdered every year on December 6th, the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women, let us also keep in our thoughts our 500 missing and murdered Aboriginal sisters, and indeed all the people whose lives have been touched by violence.

How can we make sense of this violence? As a social worker and advocate over the past fifteen years, I have had the honour of working with hundreds of women who have shared their stories with me. Their shared wisdom offers a bridge of hope connecting grief with compassion and the possibility of making our communities strong with hope, gentleness and justice for all.

Direct violence against women erodes the fabric of our community. Girls represent eighty percent of all family-related sexual assault victims. Half of all female adults will be physically or sexually assaulted at least once. Women are seventy-six percent of those whom are stalked. Across Canada, 100,000 women and children annually access our 500 women's shelters, and many more are turned away. Women made up ninety-seven percent of those killed by their male partners in over 900 murder-suicides in Canada since 1961. Because most incidents of violence against

women are not reported, these alarming numbers of direct violence are just the tip of the iceberg.

Another form of violence - structural violence - allows direct violence to continue. As Dr. Bob Mullaly argues in his upcoming book, structural violence - including social policies, structures and institutions - also kills women, albeit more slowly, through the exclusionary practices of classism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Women's lives are shortened through social, economic and political domination and exploitation. In this way, structural violence and direct violence are directly linked.

Poverty is a form of structural violence against women. Women traditionally have higher poverty rates than men through disparities in the paid labour force and unequal child-care responsibilities. Fifty percent of single-parent mothers are poor. Forty percent of Aboriginal women are poor. Thirty percent of differently-abled and visible-minority women are poor. Twenty-five percent of new-immigrant women are poor.

Our poverty, which is itself a product of gender discrimination, puts us at risk of assault by leaving us in darkened streets waiting for buses or cabs. Poverty forces us to rent unsafe housing, including ground floor and basement suites. Women in subordinate social and economic positions are particularly vulnerable to violence. Immigrant and refugee women, typically under-paid and



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***FASTFACTS* continued ...**

often working in the non-regulated domestic sector, are often threatened with deportation if they complain of abuse. As newcomers to our country they do not understand their rights, so they remain trapped. Our sisters who work in the sex trade to support themselves and their children are extremely vulnerable to physical and sexual violence and murder. Eighty percent of our sisters in prison are there for poverty related offences, and many of them experience violence at the hands of their jailers. Even within the academic community we face economic inequality. As university graduates, women earn less than men, and the disparity increases, rather than shrinks, as we progress through our careers. Recent graduates earn only 84 percent of what our male counterparts earn, and by the time we approach retirement, our salaries will be only 60 percent of theirs.

Canadians have been aware of violence against women for thirty years. But despite the fact that women make up 52 percent of the population, violence continues to be a low priority in policy-making and resource allocation. Ineffective police investigations into our 500 missing and murdered Aboriginal sisters demonstrate gross negligence. Our government's lack of commitment to end violence against women is also seen in its dwindling financial and political support for substantive equality seeking groups. Victims of the traffic in women have been jailed, and women who complain of violence are threatened with nuisance, contempt and other criminal charges. Frighteningly, racialized, poor, young women are the fastest-growing prison population in Canada.

In 2003, Canada was criticized by the United Nations for our failure to tackle discrimination against women, particularly with regards to social welfare, poverty, immigration, the treatment of Aboriginal women and trafficked women, and for slashing funding for crisis services and shelters. This gender-based violence, both direct and structural, impairs or nullifies women's access

to human rights and fundamental freedoms. It circumscribes women's ability to function as full citizens in society.

My friend, colleague, ally, and fellow member in the university community, Greg McVicker, has coined the term *femanist* to refer to a person of any gender who advocates for women's rights, challenges the status quo, and seeks to end all practices of oppression and domination. Together, as feminists and as femanists, we need to listen to and learn from women. We need to read women's literature about the root causes of violence. We need to challenge and change traditional gender norms. We need to raise our sons and nephews to delight in respect, non-violence and integrity. We need to reflect on our own behaviour and the attitudes that allow us to tolerate abuse. We need to use inclusive, non-sexist language and to confront sexist, racist, homophobic remarks. We need to write to publishers and editors when we find sexism in newspapers, magazines and journals. We need to protest the gratuitous use of violence against women in television and film. We need to challenge legislative and social policy and hold our representatives accountable to eliminating all forms of violence against women.

In short, we all need to work together to build healthy relationships based on cooperation and trust where everyone thrives. In the words of Lilla Watson, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." In recognition of the terrible events of December 6th and for all days, let us work together to end violence against women.

- Juliana West

Juliana West is a doctoral student at The University of Manitoba. Earlier this month, Juliana West delivered a moving speech at the University of Manitoba campus. This is a shortened version of that speech.



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