

Notes for Remarks

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United in our Differences

Today marks the 22nd anniversary of the Montreal Massacre. It is a day of remembrance and a call for action on violence against women.

On this day 22 years ago, 14 women at l'Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal were gunned down because of their gender. Marc Lepine, who eventually shot and killed himself, had applied for admission to the school and was rejected. In the suicide note he left behind, Lepine indicated that he saw feminists as being responsible for everything that had gone wrong in his life.

We live in a society that relishes violence in its entertainment - a society that abhors violence against children. Yet 50% of Ontario's children residing in the GTA are living below the poverty line.

The Montreal Massacre was about a man murdering women. It was about murdering intelligent women who were in the process of making much of themselves.

Just over seven years ago, the Native Women's Association of Canada launched the Sisters in Spirit Campaign to raise awareness about the 500 First Nations, Metis and Inuit women who are missing or who have been murdered in recent years.

These were women living in poverty involved in the sex trade. They struggled with drugs and alcohol. Many were victims of childhood sexual abuse. Every one of them grew up in a foster home. Every one of them started in life with potential, hopes, and dreams.

How could this have happened?

Where is the outrage?

Why is so little attention given to the reasons that Aboriginal women live such lives?

Why do so many disappearances and deaths of Aboriginal women simply go unreported?

In Canada, Aboriginal women continue to be targets of hatred and violence based on a deadly combination: their gender, their race, their socio-economic status. We see the alarming rise of bullying in the school yard – a pervasive problem that goes largely unreported because people feel that nothing will be done or that they might be subject to more severe retaliation next time it happens.

A Toronto study of our schools found that a bullying incident takes place every 7 minutes. Teachers were only aware of 4% of these incidents. Such violence cannot be separated from issues of racism, classism, homophobia and systemic discrimination in our society.

We must seek change for our children and our grandchildren; we must strive for safer communities. Surely we want a better world for ourselves and future generations?

By being here together we confirm that we are a community that can dissolve boundaries of gender, sex, culture, age, class, race while at the same time reinforcing who we are.

We each have our own personal experiences with sexism, racism, unfair treatment— the overheard remark, discrimination, the stereotyping, and the discounting of us as women, the derisive laughter at behaviours that do not constitute “the norm” - not being taken into account because of our youth.

In seeking change, we need to go beyond the discrimination that effects us personally and begin to look at root causes.

Racism is derived from the mindset which takes as a basic assumption that light-skinned people are superior to darker-skinned people. It is only a short jump to assume that men are superior to women, that Christianity is superior to other religions, that western cultures are superior to non-western – and so on.

If we are to change that mindset, we must each find new solutions by joining forces, by collectively seeking to end the continuous assaults - the violence that is all around us.

We can do this when we celebrate our differences, when we draw strength in our unity, when we work together for a common purpose, when we take leadership, each of us every day.