

Violence Against Women

Strategies for Change

BY RUTH ROACH PIERSON

Many of us will always remember where we were and what we were doing when we first heard of the murder of fourteen young women, thirteen students and a staff member, at the École polytechnique in Montreal on December 6, 1989. The murder of 14 persons within a short period of time and in a single place in what is otherwise perceived to be a society at peace is always shocking. The murder of fourteen young women at a school "that has produced dozens of prominent Quebecers"¹ sent shock waves throughout Canada. The depth of the shock and consternation with which the Montreal killings have been viewed, the extensive media coverage they have received, attest to the ivory tower reputation enjoyed by Canada's post-secondary schools. Our institutions of higher learning are places where, it is believed, the pursuit of truth and the exercise of reason prevail, and where, it is assumed, our daughters will be safe from "the lion in the streets."² For many of us who work in university and college settings as students, faculty and staff, however, the tragic news of the fourteen women murdered at the University of Montreal was a gruesome reminder of the fact that the halls and classrooms of academe are by no means free of society's systemic devaluing of women. A few who enjoy the privileges bestowed by university education have referred to Marc Lépine as "a madman"³ (he himself predicted that the media would attribute to him "the Mad Killer epithet"⁴), and some have referred to his gunning down of fourteen young women as a "senseless slaying,"⁵ an aberration, an act committed in a social vacuum. Others among us, however, saw and see a profound social significance in Lépine having yelled, before he squeezed the trigger, "You're women, you're going to be engineers. You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists!"⁶ As Jane Pepino, chairwoman of METRAC (the Metro Toronto Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children), pointedly asked on December 7, 1989, "If we say this man was crazy, does that mean every wife batterer is insane, or anyone who assaults a woman physically or sexually is insane?"⁷

What "social meaning" should be attributed to the Montreal gunman's actions was at the time and continues to be sharply contested. According to a poll released on December 28, 1989, a majority of Canadians, 59 per cent or six in ten, regarded the

murderous rampage as "a random act by an insane person," having "nothing to do with attitudes in society."⁸ Robert McKenzie, *The Toronto Star's* Quebec City bureau chief, querulously inquired on December 12, 1989: "What's going on here? One madman falls off the edge and kills 14 women and the next thing you know any man who has tolerated a sexist joke to be told in his presence is practically lumped in the same category."⁹ In contrast, at the University of Toronto's memorial service for the women killed, Gordon Cressy, Vice-President of Development and University Relations, made precisely that connection, calling on men, not simply to ignore, but to speak out and condemn sexist jokes for the degradation of women they perpetuate.

Whether we see the gunman as "mad" or "deeply troubled,"¹⁰ we contend that Lépine's targeting of fourteen young women cannot be separated from widespread and socially validated hatred and fear of women in general, that his targeting of female engineering students cannot be separated from widespread and culturally validated resentments of "uppity," "pushy" women who enter fields once monopolized by men, and that his anti-feminism cannot be separated from widespread media attacks on "strident," demanding feminists. Neither can his anti-feminism be separated from the conservative federal government's cutbacks of funding to women's shelters, women's centres and feminist publications. One lesson that might be drawn from the Montreal killings is that, as there is no more risk involved in being a self-



identified feminist than in being a woman, one may as well speak up, as a woman, for women's rights and against women's wrongs.

Women across Canada continue to mourn the tragically premature deaths of Geneviève Bergeron, Hélène Colgan, Nathalie Croteau, Barbara Daigneault, Anne-Marie Edward, Maud Haverick, Barbara Marie Klueznick, Maryse Laganier, Maryse Leclair, Anne-Marie Lemay, Sonia Pelletier, Michèle Richard, Annie St. Arneault and Annie Turcotte. But while we mourn the loss of these fourteen women and all the shining promise their young lives represented, at that same time we do not want to confer on their violent deaths a uniqueness that further obscures the everyday violence against women endemic in our society. The Montreal massacre needs to be understood in the context of,

and on a continuum with, the myriad forms of violence directed on a daily basis against women of all races, classes and ages in our society. "Right now," Michele Landsberg wrote on December 8, 1989, "somewhere in Canada, women's bones are being cracked, their eyes blackened, arms twisted, [and] minds and hearts stabbed with abusive words."¹¹ And that is as true today as it was the day she wrote it. There were experts at that time who sought to bracket the Montreal slayings within the category of mass murder and the serial killing.¹² Lest the deaths of the fourteen young women at the École polytechnique not be in vain, let us not isolate their killing from the weekly killing of girls and women, the daily assaults against female human beings in our society. But let us also reflect on the apparent contradiction between the shock and horror with which the Montreal massacre has been met and the "ho-humness" with which the quotidian violence against women is accepted as ordinary, as normal, as part of an unchanging and unchangeable status quo.

The instances of men's violence against girls and women in our society are legion. The feminist movement, in all its diversity, can take credit for creating a public discourse that has raised society's consciousness of men's violence against women as a societal problem. For instance, feminists committed to the struggle against racism in our society are increasing our awareness of how the colour of a woman's skin, or the economic insecurity of immigrant status, or the political precariousness of refugee status can expose women to violence in stark ways. Similarly, feminists organized in older women's networks and disabled women's networks are alerting us to the increased vulnerability that age and disability can bring. Likewise, lesbian-feminist analyses are educating us to the heightened risk of harassment directed against women who publicly defy heterosexual norms. Without these political movements, we would not have women's shelters. We would not have had protest against the police shooting of Sophia Cook, a young black woman from Brampton whose crime was to be a passenger in what was suspected to be a stolen car. We would not have had the painful breaking of the conspiracy of silence that kept the crimes of incest and child sexual abuse locked away in the patriarchal closet. Our national radio

program, the CBC, would not have given air space to the recent Report of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses.¹³ Our "national" newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, would not have covered the report recently produced by Aruna Papp of the South Asian Family Support Services on the epidemic of violence against South Asian married women in Scarborough.¹⁴

But it is a perpetual struggle to prevent indifference from closing in again on all these issues. On the one hand, we have to negotiate our way very carefully to avoid being assailed in Hollywood movies, rock videos and popular television series by women-hating sentiments and women-disfiguring images; and it does seem hard to believe that long-term exposure to such misogyny has no negative effect. On the other hand, the sporadic and decontextualized reportage in our press of the real daily violence against women contributes to our acceptance of it as the natural state of affairs.

Like poverty, it will seemingly always be with us. It took a particularly dramatic spate of eleven women and six of their children being killed in one month in Montreal by their male partners for the nation's "national" newspaper, in late September 1990, to devote some journalistic analysis to these killings beyond their mere itemization as crime statistics. Battered women are frequently blamed for staying in abusive relationships, but in virtually every one of the Montreal cases, "the woman had recently left her partner."¹⁵ In one case, the man "picked up his wife of 32 years" from her place of work, ostensibly "to take her to a lawyer's office to sign divorce papers"; but instead "he took her to an isolated field and blew off her head before killing himself." In another, the former husband who had "visitation rights [to] his children," aged two and four, "shot them to death while they slept, but not before calling his estranged wife and telling her of his intentions." Afterwards, he killed himself. On June 20, 1990, the Emily Stowe Shelter for Women in Toronto held a vigil for one of its ex-residents, Chia-Tsu Hsu. She had come to the shelter on December 6, 1988, just one year to the day before the murders at the École polytechnique. According to the Emily Stowe Shelter for Women Newsletter, in addition to her "low-paying job that kept her on her feet for long

hours," Chia-Tsu stayed up late at night learning English. "Determined not to reconcile with her spouse[,] she found an apartment and was on the road to independence." But the abusive husband she had fled, tracked her down and attacked her with a knife at the Warden subway on March 6th, 1989. Charged with carrying a dangerous weapon, not with attempted murder, he was placed on probation. On April 20, 1990, at her apartment, he hacked Chia-Tsu to death with a meat cleaver.¹⁶ We are led to believe that if the woman leaves the abusive relationship, she leaves the abuse. But, as surfaced briefly in a background special to *The Globe and Mail* on the "Abuse of Women: an Intimate Crime," "many women who have ended relationships with violent men find that the violence does not end with the relationship." The article cited a 1987 York University study which "found [in one sample] that 46 per cent of separated and divorced women are abused by their former [partners]."¹⁷ According to the most recent data from the Canadian Culture for Justice Statistics, in 1988, 70 women were killed by their husbands, a little more than one a week. The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, however, does not keep statistics on the murder of female mates by former boy friends or ex-husbands. The York University study was carried out within a framework created by the feminist discourse on men's violence against women.

Clearly, to combat men's violence against women, there is much work yet to be done. Surely, when territorial circuit court Justice Michel Bourassa can be exonerated for saying to a reporter that "The majority of rapes in the Northwest Territories occur when the woman is drunk. The man comes along, sees a pair of hips and helps himself";¹⁸ surely, when Ontario Provincial Court Judge Sidney Harris can get away with ruling that wife assaults that "result from 'momentary passion'... shouldn't lead to prosecution";¹⁹ surely, when the British Columbia Court of Appeal upholds Judge Peter van der Hoop's judgement that an adult male sexual molester of a three-year old female child should be given a suspended sentence because he was the victim of the girl's aggression;²⁰ surely, in light of these decisions, we can say that the justice system is in need of reform. But it is the conviction of many who work in the front

lines against men's violence against women that there is a fundamental precondition to such reform. Attitudes have to be changed. As Claude Roy, president of a Quebec association for counselors of violent men, remarked, "the greatest challenge is to get violent men to take responsibility for their actions, which is difficult in a society that condones [male] violence against women through silence." And in the words of Françoise David, coordinator of a coalition of 80 women's centres in Quebec, "the only way to eliminate violence against women in our society is to change attitudes through education."²¹

And that brings us back to the murder of the fourteen young women in Montreal a year ago on December 6, 1989. Some large measure of the shock and horror occasioned by that tragic event was due to the disbelief that such murderous acts could occur in the hallowed halls of academe. But journalists who have labeled the Montreal massacre the act of a madman are recipients of university educations; and the justices whose decisions condone men's violence against women all have not only university educations, but also post-graduate degrees. What is the record of our institutions of higher learning with regard to combatting racist and sexist attitudes? What is the institutional backing given to the Ethnic and Women's Studies programs that have trailblazed the research revealing, and the courses sensitizing students to, the deeply embedded racism and sexism in our culture? And if, as the title of Dionne Brand's latest book of poetry declares, *No Language Is Neutral*,²² what about the language policy of our "national" English-language newspaper that persists in using the term spokesman when referring to spokeswomen of organizations and government offices?²³

¹ "Policeman finds daughter dead," *Toronto Star*, 7 December 1989, A1.

² John Bemrose, "Lionhearted drama: Judith Thompson Explores the Urban Jungle," review of *Lion in the Streets*, by Judith Thompson, in *Maclean's*, 19 November 1990, p. 69.

³ Slinger, "There's No Place to Hide From a Madman," *Toronto Star*, 10 December 1989, A2. See also "14 Women Killed in Massacre: Montreal Gunman's Letter Spewed Hate at Feminists," "Gun-

man Left Three-page Letter Spewing Hate at Feminists," *Toronto Star*, 7 December 1989, A34, continued from A1.

⁴ "Text of Letter Written by Marc Lépine on Dec. 6, 1989," *Gazette*, 25 November 1990.

⁵ Elliott Leyton, an anthropologist at Memorial University of Newfoundland, was so quoted by Robert McLeod, "Mass Murders Not Increasing, Canadian anthropologist says," *Globe & Mail*, 8 December 1989, A13. By 11 December 1989, Leyton had changed his tune, now saying in interviews with the media that the slaying of the 14 women "is 'a grievous blow' to relations between men and women," demonstrating "how male chauvinism threatens women's lives." "Slayings deal blow to gender relations, murder expert says," *Globe & Mail*, 11 December 1989, A9.

⁶ Editorials: "Montreal Massacre: A Country Mourns," *Toronto Star*, 8 December 1989, A30.

⁷ Frances Kelly and Bill Taylor, "'Never again' Should be Vow Women Plead," *Toronto Star*, 8 December 1989, A17.

⁸ "59% Call Massacre Only Random Act, Poll Finds," *Toronto Star*, 28 December 1989, A1.

⁹ In the same column, he complained that "In the past few days, we've seen Marc Lépine transformed into a symbol not only of rapists and wife-beaters but of men who consume pornography, who oppose abortion-on-demand or, even, who leer at women in swimming pools." Robert McKenzie, "Ontario, Quebec See Massacre Differently," *Toronto Star*, 12 December 1989, A21.

¹⁰ Victor Malarek and Benoit Aubin, "Killer's Letter Blames Feminists: Man Very Intelligent, But Deeply Troubled, Police Say," *Globe & Mail*, 8 December 1989, A1.

¹¹ Michele Landsberg, "Killer's Rage Too Familiar to Canadians: Culture Condones Violence Against Women, Children," *Toronto Star*, 8 December 1989, A1, A16.

¹² Robert McLeod, "Mass Murders Not Increasing, Canadian Anthropologist Says," *Globe & Mail*, 8 December 1989, A13. *The Globe and Mail* and other media perpetuated this association by seeking repeated interviews with the anthropologist Elliott Leyton and regarding him as a "murder expert" because he wrote a book on serial killers and despite the fact his

study is totally bereft of gender analysis.

¹³ Lobby Committee of the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses, *Balance the Power*, Background Report, Annual Lobby of MPPs, 19 November 1990.

¹⁴ Nicola Pulling, "Wife Assault Called 'Epidemic' Among S. Asians," *Globe & Mail*, 19 November 1990, A8.

¹⁵ André Picard and Michelle Lalonde, "Killings of Women Are 'Routine'," *Globe & Mail*, 26 September 1990, A1.

¹⁶ Joan Greene, "A Tribute to Chia-Tsu Hsu," *Emily Stowe Shelter for Women Newsletter*, Summer 1990, pp. 4-5; *Balance the Power*, p. 11.

¹⁷ Michelle Lalonde, "Abuse of Women: An Intimate Crime," *Globe & Mail*, 26 September 1990, A6. Presumably she was citing D. Ellis and L. Wight, "Wife Abuse Among Separated and Divorced Women," *Victimology* 12 (1987).

¹⁸ "Judge's Regrets Over His Remarks on Sex Assault Leave Women Cold," *Toronto Star*, 18 January 1990, A12; "Women Upset as N.W.T. Judge Exonerated," *Toronto Star*, 14 October 1990, A9.

¹⁹ Rick Haliechuk, "Don't Prosecute All Wife Assaults, Judge Suggests," *Toronto Star*, 16 January 1990, A2.

²⁰ "Women Assail Judge's Remarks in Sex Case," *Globe & Mail*, 27 November 1989, A9; "'Aggressive' Tot Ruling Upheld in B.C. Sex Case," *Toronto Star*, 14 January 1990.

²¹ Picard and Lalonde, "Killings of Women Are 'Routine': Montreal Killings Largely Unnoticed by Public," *Globe & Mail*, 26 September 1990, A1, A6.

²² Dionne Brand, *No Language Is Neutral* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990).

²³ This policy was changed in 1991.

This article was adapted from Ruth Roach Pierson's introductory remarks for the recent conference, Violence Against Women: Strategies for Change, November 1990. The conference, in commemoration of the fourteen women murdered at the École polytechnique of the University of Montreal, was organized by the Centre for Women's Studies in Education of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE).

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