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The scourge of femicide

It would be at least somewhat consoling, three decades on, if the Montreal Massacre of Dec. 6, 1989, had been the catalyst for social change and the reduction, if not elimination, of violence against women.

That day, at École Polytechnique in Montreal, a man armed with a semi-automatic weapon entered an engineering classroom and unleashed his misogyny and fury.

Twelve engineering students, a nursing student and a university employee - targeted specifically because they were women - were killed.

At the time, "femicide" was not a word much used. Thirty-two years later, the lessons of 1989 notwithstanding, it is an escalating crisis, in Canada as around the world.

In late November University of Guelph researcher Dr. Myrna Dawson released her latest report on femicide rates, saying killings of women and girls for reasons of sex or gender have risen both in Canada and abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Repeated lockdowns have increased domestic tensions and the reduced access

to services and shelters has made women more vulnerable to violence, the report said.

"It is something that we should be concerned about," said Dawson, explaining that her report cites only women and girls who were killed, not those continuing to experience violence.

According to the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, of which Dawson is director, 92 women and girls were killed in Canada in the first six months of 2021. That's up from 78 during the same period in 2020 and 60 in 2019.

Lockdowns may have changed the dynamics in homes around the world, but pandemic measures remain a contributing factor, not the cause, Dawson maintained.

"These orders do not suddenly turn previously non-violent men into violent men," she said. "Instead, it's likely exacerbated the violence some women and children have already been living with."

At root, the rising numbers are based on what Dawson calls "disaster patriarchy," social structures in which women already treated as inferior to men worsen in times of emergency.

"A key contributor to male violence against women is gender inequality and the pandemic has significantly increased inequality," Dawson said.

"Throughout the pandemic, women have lost more jobs, are picking up child-care responsibilities and stepping in to educate children when schools close," she said.

"This is what 'disaster patriarchy' looks like. When there is a disaster, women are typically impacted more profoundly than men."

Still, it's important to understand that "the pandemic has not done this to women," Dawson said. "Men have done this to women."

In the Throne Speech that opened Canada's 44th Parliament last month, the Liberal government acknowledged the "unacceptable rise in violence against women and girls" during the pandemic and committed to action on its 10-year national plan to combat gender-based violence.

It will take that and very much more.

Without real societal changes, Dawson said, femicide rates will remain constant or increase.

Nov. 25 was the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women and the beginning of the Global 16 Days Campaign, which seeks to raise awareness of male violence against women.

Geneviève Bergeron, Hélène Colgan, Nathalie Croteau, Barbara Daigneault, Anne-Marie Edward, Maud Haviernick, Maryse Laganière, Maryse Leclair, Anne-Marie Lemay, Sonia Pelletier, Michèle Richard, Annie St-Arneault, Annie Turcotte and Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz were the women killed on Dec. 6, 1989.

Thirty-two years on, their names stand as a summons to change. A summons not yet answered.