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When feminism is received with violence

Picture above: Participants marched against sexual assault and harassment at #MeToo March in Hollywood last year.

The reaction to the 1989 Montreal massacre helps us to better understand the limits of the current awakening

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December 6th is a solemn day for Canadians. It is the anniversary of the greatest mass shooting in modern Canadian history, perhaps the greatest mass shooting in Canada or the US that explicitly targeted women. Most Americans probably don't know about the Montreal Massacre, as it has become known. But given several deadly attacks on women by misogynists who declared themselves selfish only last year - and how quickly these killings escaped the front page and public memory - this year's anniversary carries a special weight, no matter which side of Canada/US border you are on.

In 1989, Marc Lépine, 25, entered an engineering class at École Polytechnique in Montreal with a semi-automatic hunting rifle that he legally obtained. He ordered all men to leave before shooting women, six of whom died before aid arrived.

From there, Lépine walked the halls and the school cafeteria. In the end, he killed a total of 14 women and wounded another 10 (plus four men caught in the crossfire) before turning the gun on himself.

In the days, weeks and years after the attack, the question of whether he was anti-feminist became a point of contention.

Feminists pointed to some important evidence suggesting that it was. They emphasized that Lépine explicitly targeted women, segregating them from his male colleagues. Before he started filming, he shouted, "You're all feminists and I hate feminists!"

Lépine also left a suicide note that listed 19 other women he wanted to kill, including Francine Pelletier (a leading feminist activist and journalist), a Québec minister and some police officers who had pissed Lépine off by playing in a work volleyball league.

And yet several people, from experts to doctors, saw the shooting in a different light. They denied the "political reasons" for the crime Lépine defended, arguing that the shooting was about the psychological collapse of a man who could not find his place in society. For example, a psychiatrist in Montreal proclaimed in *La Presse de Montreal* that Lépine was "as innocent as his victims and himself a victim of an increasingly ruthless society. According to Pelletier, a Québec City columnist also claimed that "the truth was that the crime had nothing to do with women.

A year later, the remaining contents of Lépine's suicide note - not just the list of women - were published by *La Presse*, confirming its motivations: "You would notice that if I commit suicide today, it is not for economic reasons (but) for political reasons," Lépine wrote in French. "I have decided to send the feminists who have always ruined my life to their Creator. . Even if the epithet of the mad killer is attributed to me by the media, I consider myself a rational scholar."

Still, many argued that the wider implications of Lépine's note did not matter. The director of *École Polytechnique*, André Bazergui, said this at a press conference after the letter was published. "Who cares? Seriously, who cares?" he said.

Such statements irritated Pelletier, who argued that ignoring the political nature of Lépine's crime was dangerous.

"He was our first terrorist and nobody treated him that way," she told the *Toronto Star* in 2014. "These (engineering) students dared to take the place of men. They represented our future and he was looking at our future - as we imagined ourselves."

In 1989, the shooting at *École Polytechnique* was innovative in its direction and explicit hatred of women, even though the misogyny that fed it dates back centuries. It was a by-product of what author Susan Faludi identified as a broader reaction to second wave feminism, the results of which shaped everything from pop culture to men's rights groups.

Today, many aspects of the Montreal massacre seem familiar in Canada and the US. The violent misogyny that Lépine advocated has resurfaced in a visceral, sometimes deadly way. More recently, in November, a man who posted videos about his hatred for women opened fire in a yoga studio in Tallahassee. The shooter killed two women before turning the gun on himself.

There are also important connections between domestic violence and mass shooters that often go unnoticed. This was made clear once

again in the recent shooting at Chicago Mercy Hospital, where Dr. Tamara O'Neal was shot, supposedly by her former fiancé, who killed three others before killing herself.

Overall, violence against women - particularly indigenous women, women of color and transgender women - remains a pressing issue. The Canadian Women's Foundation reports that a woman is killed by a current or former partner every six days; in the U.S., that number drops every three days, according to the Violence Policy Center.

And, as in the case of Lépine, we continue to see attempts to deny, underestimate or simply ignore the violence that manifests itself in this misogyny. Consider, for example, the approval by an Alaskan judge of a judicial settlement that did not result in prison for a man who brutally assaulted an Alaskan indigenous woman. According to NPR, the woman was looking for a ride when her attacker picked her up and took her to a place where he choked her until she was unconscious. Then he masturbated her. The justification for the settlement? He wasn't likely to reoffend.

And don't forget President Trump's notorious reflections after the Brett M. Kavanaugh hearings that this is a "scary time" to be young. Such statements - and the widespread belief that the #MeToo movement "went too far" - paint women as powerful figures who appreciate their ability to ruin a man's life with a single tweet.

#MeToo has raised awareness of sexual violence and misconduct. And voters also responded by voting for the Alaskan judge in protest and voting for a wave of women to represent them in the 2018 midterm elections. But progress is tenuous, and veterans of the second wave feminist movement are still fighting the same battles decades after they began.

And that's why remembering the shooting of École Polytechnique is so important today. In 2014, one survivor, Nathalie Provost, told the Montreal Gazette that she felt Canada was regressing and that the feminist movement remained "fragile". Others echoed that feeling. Jocelyne Dallaire Légaré, who managed many of the preparations for the funeral of the Politecnica victims, said violence against women remains a taboo topic. She pointed to the women who demonstrated against Canadian radio presenter Jian Ghomeshi and comedian Bill Cosby in 2014 as evidence. Four years later, those statements resonate now more than ever.

Next year will be the 30th anniversary of the filming at École Polytechnique. It is not yet known whether this year is accompanied by a collective willingness to take seriously the greatest lesson of tragedy - which misogyny kills -.

Until then, a new generation of women and feminists will probably be introduced to the filming this year. Now is a dark moment in Canadian history and in the history of the women's movement as well. But it's still much more. Because, as many events in 2018 have shown, the history of women's rights and the cruel reaction provoked is still being written.

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