

Allison Hanes: Reflections on a misogynist massacre at Polytechnique

In the 35 years since a gunman murdered 14 women, we've become all too familiar with misogyny. But now there are new threats to gender equality that must be addressed.

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There is a heaviness in the hearts of many Montrealers every Dec. 6 that hasn't gotten any easier to bear after 35 years.

On this date in 1989, a gunman murdered 14 women at Polytechnique Montréal because they were women. Thirteen others were injured, countless more were scarred by the horrors they witnessed, and an entire city was haunted by this senseless violence.

Every year we mourn the loss of 14 brilliant and vibrant souls who could have been our own sisters, daughters, friends or classmates.

[We say their names](#): Geneviève Bergeron; Hélène Colgan; Nathalie Croteau; Barbara Daigneault; Anne-Marie Edward; Maud Haviernick; Barbara-Maria Klucznik-Widajewicz; Maryse Laganière; Maryse Leclair; Anne-Marie Lemay; Sonia Pelletier; Michèle Richard; Annie St-Arneault; and Annie Turcotte.

[We try to remember them](#), not just as *les filles de Poly*, but for who they were, what they meant to their families, what they'd achieved in their unjustly curtailed lives and what they'd hoped to accomplish had their futures not been so cruelly stolen.

We beam lights into the heavens and lay white roses. We [award scholarships to the best and brightest](#) young female engineers of today to fulfill the legacy of the lost and defy malevolent intentions of the perpetrator.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, centre, flanked by Premier François Legault and Mayor Valérie Plante, speaks during a vigil on Mount Royal marking the 30th anniversary of the mass shooting at École Polytechnique. Photo by CHRISTINNE MUSCHI /REUTERS

We fight alongside the survivors of the massacre [for stricter gun-control laws](#) in hopes that this never happens again, anywhere.

The duty of remembrance remains strong in this city. May it always be so.

But in many ways it feels like we are no closer to addressing the societal forces that cost 14 women their lives during that [19-minute rampage on a cold, snowy night](#) 35 years ago. As we pause to reflect on this sombre anniversary, we are still facing the same darkness we did in 1989, although it has morphed and changed and evolved with the times.

The killer — who will remain deliberately nameless to strip him of his notoriety — left nothing to speculation. In his suicide note he was crystal clear that he was out to get “the feminists who have always ruined my life.” And he included a list of high-profile “radical feminists” who “had the gift of making me angry.” But since these politicians, journalists and union leaders would have been hard to attack, he stalked proxies in the classrooms and corridors of Polytechnique.

Of course, it was easier at the time to dismiss his evil deed as the irrational actions of a madman. And the shooter did have mental health woes. But a lot of people experience psychological distress and don’t gun down innocents. So it’s more of a convenient excuse.

Even the killer’s backlash against feminism — his use of the word “feminist” as an epithet to make women reject the label — disguised an uncomfortable truth.

Misogyny, the insidious hatred of women, was long the missing piece of the puzzle. The shooter resented women taking their rightful places at the prestigious engineering school. He took out his anger over his own failings on them in an act of cowardice.

It took decades to fully come to terms with and officially recognize the true character of the crime even though it was written in black and white from the start. The city of Montreal [finally put up a sign in the memorial park](#), Place-du-6-Décembre-1989, acknowledging the “antifeminist attack” and denouncing all forms of violence against women, in 2019, for the 30th anniversary.

The city of Montreal put up a sign in the memorial park, Place-du-6-Décembre-1989, acknowledging the “antifeminist attack” at École Polytechnique and denouncing all forms of violence against women, in 2019, for the 30th anniversary. Photo by Allen McInnis /Montreal Gazette

The plaque and this recognition are important. But they don’t magically make this ugly kind of loathing disappear.

If anything, misogyny is more prevalent than ever these days. Some forms are so subtle and ingrained, many people are barely aware. Even women may unconsciously carry a self-loathing.

But there's hatred of women and there's *hatred of women*. The shooter was motivated by a virulent strain of misogyny, one that caused him to lash out at all women. Today we might label him an incel.

Short for involuntarily celibate, the term describes men who blame women for their lack of sexual prowess. They then succumb to the warped view that women exist only for their gratification and should be subservient.

This sickening brand of misogyny came to popular knowledge after the [Toronto van attack in 2018](#). Eleven people died after the killer weaponized a rented vehicle and mowed down pedestrians on Yonge St. An avowed incel, his main target was women. It, too, is one of the worst mass slayings in Canadian history, and a second massacre motivated by misogyny.

This is an extreme ideology — one that sickens men as well as women. But violence against women writ large is a relatively rare phenomenon.

The ubiquity of daily abuse some women face — in their own homes at the hands of intimate partners — is a much more widespread scourge.

So far this year in Canada, 167 women have been murdered, according to the [Canadian Femicide Observatory for Accountability and Justice](#).

In Quebec, 21 women have been killed by an intimate partner, [according to a tally by TVA](#). And 2024 is not over yet.

A recent report by a special committee struck by the Quebec coroner's office attempted to [identify risk factors for femicide](#). The long list includes the use of coercive control — employing various strategies ranging from violence to threats to manipulation to arbitrary rules to deprive their wives or girlfriends of autonomy and freedom. The loss of that control, such as the end of a relationship, is often a trigger for femicide.

Since Dec. 6 is now the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women in Canada, it's important to reflect on the roots of these behaviours and attitudes. How are they learned and handed down? It may be the legacy of patriarchy or the result of human frailty. But it also is the product of marketing in the digital era.

The concept of male supremacy has been popularized and normalized by social media influencers like Andrew Tate. Disillusioned and wayward young men are being fed the message their problems are women's fault. And the antidote to their ailments and inadequacies is to assert male dominance.

The [Télé-Québec documentary Alphas](#) recently exposed the extent of this mindset. [Tate may be facing sexual-assault and human-trafficking charges](#) in Romania. But there are

legions of homegrown imitators spreading this gospel of muscles, money, materialism and control over women.

So masculinity now goes hand-in-hand with misogyny.

And it's so mainstream that the next president of the United States [uses this rhetoric and embraces many of its evangelists](#).

The American electorate's preference for a president who has been found civilly liable of sexual abuse and has set in motion the rollback of abortion rights also attests to a misogyny infecting individuals as much as it infests society. Black and Latino men voted for president-elect Donald Trump, despite his increasingly racist diatribes during the campaign, prioritizing maintaining their male privilege over the prospect of electing a woman who is Black and Indian.

Yet, the most highly educated women in the U.S. overwhelmingly supported Vice-President Kamala Harris.

Studies have detected a [polarization of the political and social views of the sexes](#), particularly among younger generations. [Polling by Change Research showed a 21-per-cent gap](#) between men and women under 35 who identify as liberal or progressive in the U.S. American women tend to lean progressive while males skew more conservative. Among older cohorts, these differences are negligible.

The MeToo movement, which has called out sexual predators while attempting to break through the silence, stigma and shame of survivors, may be galvanizing perspectives along gender lines. So, too, is the overturning of abortion rights by the U.S. Supreme Court.

But the deepening divide is showing up in other places as well. The same survey found major divergences between men and women ages 18 to 34 in what media they consume, economic concerns, whether they view cancel culture as a problem or accountability, and the make-or-break traits they look for in the people they date. In essence, younger generations of men and women are struggling to relate to each other.

There's a scene in the documentary *Alphas* that illustrates this awkwardness. It features a classroom discussion at a college where the men defend the appeal of hypermasculinity and the women share their take on a popular meme on social media. This either/or hypothetical question asks a woman to choose whether she'd rather be chased by a man or a bear if alone in the woods. Most pick the bear because, to cite one of many justifications, the animal might physically harm them, but the man might also lie, cheat, steal, harass and sexually assault them.

This deep lack of trust is far from amusing.

Men and women growing farther apart is bad for interpersonal relationships and it's bad for society. It certainly doesn't help the cause of equality, where mutual respect and understanding is critical.

It could be downright dangerous. This disconnect breeds the types of resentments, jealousies and scapegoating that compelled a killer to do the unthinkable 35 years ago — especially if there are new whisperers stoking this rancour.

The shooting at Polytechnique was a wake-up call about the antipathy that existed toward women. But the expectation that naming this ill would ultimately banish it has proven naive. The silent hope that the gunman was just an anachronistic outlier whose misogynistic views would fade with time has been exposed as wishful thinking. Even as women have lived up to their full potential in engineering and so many other fields, even as they've taken leadership roles at the highest levels, full equality remains elusive 35 years later.

So this Dec. 6 is a reminder of how much more work there is to do. And it's a sign that fathers, husbands, brothers, boyfriends and sons are needed as indispensable allies now more than ever — on this painful anniversary and every day.

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