

## Economic hard times cast shadow over women

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Today is the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women in Canada. Typically on this day each year, there is a lot of remembrance. Action is another matter.

Fears are that this trend may continue, if not increase, now that governments are flagging austerity at every level. That would be dangerous because research and experience show that violence against women rises during tough economic times.

The observance of that terrible day in 1989 when Marc Lepine stalked and murdered 14 women at Montreal's l'École Polytechnique is, regrettably, an opportunity to keep ongoing violence against women on the public policy agenda.

Political representatives county-wide wear the symbolic rose button or white ribbon to show their support, but they don't often announce significant public funding or action to mirror the anger and angst of the vigils or the everyday reality of violence in the lives of women and girls.

During a recession, the fear is that violence against women will rise while meaningful action on the issue will fall. That worry is well-placed.

The media has already reported increasing calls by women to crisis lines and police. Catholic Family Services in Durham region reported a 24% increase in referrals for domestic violence in the last three months of 2008. The Canadian Mental Health Association in London reported a rise in domestic violence in spring of 2009. Brockville reported a 100% increase in domestic violence calls to police during that period.

In spring of 2009, stories about a stunning increase in calls to shelters in Calgary, where the recession hit hard, were reported in newspapers across Canada—a 200% increase in one year; a 300% increase in the month before the stories ran.

A spot survey just conducted by the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses bears out the continuing trend toward increasing calls for help, despite predictions that the economic outlook is positive and recovery has started.

A comparison of service delivery in the years 2007 and 2010 in 15 women's shelters across the province shows that requests for support have increased, albeit not as dramatically as those of Alberta.

Crisis calls increased by almost 15% between the two years; admissions of women and children increased by 20%. Shelters had to "turn away" 44% more women and children in 2010 than in 2007 because they were full. In smaller towns with fewer services, the shelters faced double the demand of larger cities.

Each year, the women's shelter Association gathers the names of women and children murdered in situations where an intimate partner is either charged or commits suicide. In 2008 and 2009, the total was 16 for each year. In 2010 (up to the present) it is 21.

Admittedly, the numbers are not scientific and cannot be decisively linked to the recession, but they are troubling. Still more troubling, however, is the possibility that governments will overlook the need to increase support for women rather than to freeze or lower to meet the demands of austerity.

We have been there.

In the Mike Harris era of the mid-90s, cuts to women's services and broad social programs such as social assistance and housing, forced many women to stay in abusive relationships. Murders of women increased in Canada, primarily in the Province of Ontario. Services in Ontario are still struggling to recover.

The mid-90s was a time of growing government restraint both federally and provincially, somewhat like today but far less acute. The global economy had not yet failed.

Nationally, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been clear that national priorities are fixed on cost-cutting and reducing the \$45.4 billion federal deficit. The Province of Ontario also has an \$18.7 billion dollar deficit to address.

Both federally and provincially, all political parties are in election campaign mode. The timing of the federal election is a guessing game; some are guessing spring of next year. The Ontario election is fixed for October 6, 2011.

As a result, no one knows which political party will be responsible for ultimately guiding the country and the province back to economic stability. What is clear, however, is that right now is the time to raise issues of women's human and equity rights, not when an election is finally called.

In the noise of the election campaigning that is now a daily exercise for politicians; it is hard for women and children to have a voice in the din. It seems harder still, sadly, to make the case that their lives should trump the HST, hydro billing or gasoline prices in the political and public discourse.

Public policy that primarily serves cost-cutting and austerity, however, may ultimately result in more violence against women and their children at a time when government should protect the human and equity rights threatened by massive economic shifts.

For December 6<sup>th</sup> to be truly meaningful, it must be observed not just with remembering women, but with promising not to forget them when governments divvy up the tax dollars paid by women and men for the programs and equality measures needed to stop violence against women.