

**Prince Edward Island Advisory Council on the Status of Women**  
**Presentation on Family Violence Prevention**  
**to the Standing Committee on Health, Social Services and Seniors**

Presented by Jane Ledwell and Michelle Jay

March 12, 2014

Every year for over twenty years, Island women organize and host a Montreal Massacre Memorial Service on December 6<sup>th</sup>. We honour the memory of murdered women with roses and candles and Silent Witnesses. We remember the 14 victims of the Montreal Massacre of 1989, but also the 9 Prince Edward Island women who have been murdered since 1989 at the hands of men who knew them.

Some of these women's deaths fell into the category of "family violence," committed by dating partners, common-law or marital partners, or exes. But some of these deaths were not "family violence." Some were murdered by acquaintances or neighbours. The women murdered in the Montreal Massacre were murdered by a stranger, but they were selected, singled out, and murdered *because they were women*.

This is part of the reason that the Advisory Council on the Status of Women talks about "violence against women and children" as well as "family violence." As a province, we need to work on both. Both violence against women and family violence are about power and control. And, we argue strongly, the root causes of both are found in gender inequality which distributes power and control unequally in families and in society.

Within the framework of interpersonal violence, family violence is a major kind of violence. If we look at the way "family violence" is defined here in PEI by the Premier's Action Committee on Family Violence Prevention, we see it includes many forms of emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual violence and many types of

“family” relationship: current and former intimate partners (married and unmarried same-sex and opposite-sex couples, and dating partners); a legal guardian or parent and child; blood, marriage or adoptive relatives such as brothers and sisters; and a live-in caregiver and care recipient.

Because of inequalities within family relationships, much, but not all, “family violence” defined this way is violence against women and children. However, what we are talking about most of the time – the relationship violence we are talking about that causes the most injury and harm – is male violence against women and children. It is important to name this fact and address it. Even violence **by** women against men, other women, or children, takes place in a societal context where women and men are **not equal** in power.

So, that being said first, there are two additional problems with looking at preventing “family violence” without looking at violence against women and children.

The first problem is that it forces a definition of “family” that is absurd to women leaving an abusive or violent relationship, enforcing that a person you may only have dated for a brief while and who abused and hurt you is your “family.” This may seem like a small point, but it is meaningful. By these definitions, a person who consented to date an abuser once and is harmed after that date experiences “family violence.” However, a person who said no to that first date and is later harmed is **not** experiencing family violence. There can be implicit victim-blaming in asking the person who said yes to a first date to treat the violence as “family violence.” The power to choose and define who belongs to you as “family” is an essential power of self-identity, and to use language that denies that choice is denigrating and disempowering.

The second and perhaps more significant problem with talking about “family violence” without talking about “violence against women and children” is that a

focus on family violence may not give us adequate tools to prevent violence against women and children committed by strangers, acquaintances, neighbours, or friends. For example, preventing “family violence” will not address the incredible, shameful problem of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada. Some of the hundreds of cases of missing and murdered indigenous women are cases of “family violence,” but many are not. These cases that fall outside of “family violence” need different solutions, and they need prevention strategies that look at gender and social inequality.

The essential point is that family violence, violence against women and children, and, yes, even violence by women – all forms of interpersonal violence – play out in a local and global context of gender inequality. For indigenous and racialized women, for differently abled women, for women whose age categories are less valued by society, and for women who are vulnerable due to economic circumstances, those inequalities are doubled, and they face double disadvantages. Prevention requires that we look these inequalities in the face and begin to address social inequities that are at the base of what makes people vulnerable to violence. We are all living in a world that gives us very clear, gendered signals about who we should be and how we should act, and men are socialized to be “masculine” in a way that includes problematic toughness and aggression and emotional inexpressivity alongside being a good provider and protector; women are socialized to be “feminine” in a way that includes obedience and compliance and dependence alongside being nurturers and carers.

Culture determines gender roles and what is masculine and feminine. Both men and women are harmed by these gender roles that limit our ability to be full and expressive human beings and to build relationships of trust and care.

This is why when you hear from the Advisory Council on the Status of Women, we will talk about violence against women and children AND family violence. It is in this context of gender inequality that the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women

works to advise government and educate the public on issues that affect women's equality.

One of the tools we use to make and follow up recommendations and to assess the Prince Edward Island government's progress towards women's equality goals is the Equality Report Card. The report card assesses action on some selected priorities and action in some general categories, including violence prevention. There is a great deal of history behind the recommendations selected for assessment in the report card. We'd like to tell you a little about some of the violence prevention priorities our Council members are currently focusing on.

Looking at the section of the Report Card that deals directly with Violence Prevention:

Our first recommendation relates to government funding support for Family Violence Prevention Services and the PEI Rape and Sexual Assault Centre and other community-based organizations that support violence prevention or help victims of violence. These services are essential to supporting victims and creating healing in the community. These services need to be funded at a level that ensures they are sustainable without constant community fundraising. Our Council also sees the need for these services to receive sufficient funding so that the front-line workers, who are experts in their field, are paid well for what is challenging and important work. Recent years have seen cuts to these vital organizations that have not been restored, and funding levels consistently fall behind increases in costs and expenses.

Our second recommendation in the Equality Report Card is that woman abuse protocols be developed and applied, and that there be follow-up and training for the use of these protocols. These family abuse protocols are step-by-step guides for front-line workers in justice, health, and social services to recognize the signs of abuse and violence and provide appropriate interventions and support for victims at every step of their interaction with, for instance, the hospital or the social

assistance worker or the police officer. There has been continuing work on updating protocols and developing new ones, and training, evaluation, and other follow-up will ensure that they are working for the people they were designed to help.

Our third recommendation relates to training for police and justice workers, who are so often the first responders to situations of relationship violence and violence against women and children. This is an area where there is consistent and good work by government that requires continuing attention to maintain and supplement training.

Our fourth recommendation relates to measures and resources to allow adult protection workers to provide more help to adults who are experiencing abuse. New provisions for mandatory reporting to Adult Protection are a step in the right direction to preventing and addressing abuse of older adults and vulnerable adults, as long as we remember it is a small group of adults who are deemed “vulnerable” under the Adult Protection Act.

Our fifth recommendation acknowledges that double disadvantage that many face as a result of belonging to specific groups or categories. We call for enhanced and specialized programs for victims of violence from specific groups, such as youth or seniors, newcomers or racialized women, women with physical or intellectual disabilities, Aboriginal people, or other diverse, at-risk groups.

Our Council members’ conclusion in the Equality Report Card is that the provincial government continues to do generally good work towards preventing and eliminating violence against women and children. The Premier’s Action Committee on Family Violence Prevention is an essential part of this. So is the Family Violence Prevention Coordinator, Adult Protection, and Victim Services. Beyond its own role, the Province relies heavily on community agencies to do violence prevention work and provide services to victims. And the resources to these community-based services are inadequate to meet the need.

Recommendations related to violence are prominent in other categories as well, and our recommendations line up strongly with those you will hear from the Premier's Action Committee on Family Violence Prevention (PAC). Prior to the most recent five-year mandate of PAC, our Council members were very strong advocates for the renewal of this Committee, and as the current mandate comes to a close next month, the Advisory Council on the Status of Women continues to see PAC as an irreplaceable tool for bringing together government and community groups to share information and recommend strategies and actions to prevent and eliminate violence.

One key area for women leaving abusive or violent situations is access to justice, especially access to justice for family matters. Access to family law legal aid is a constant need, and year after year, the majority of women who call us for help and advice require the assistance of a lawyer and cannot afford one.

Within access to justice, the most important recommendation that we have brought forward again and again and that still requires action is the implementation of a pilot project for a Domestic Violence Court. We understand that options for therapeutic courts, including a domestic violence court, is under study by government, and we strongly urge that the domestic violence court model be explored first. A domestic violence court allows the court to look at the whole context and dynamic of a relationship that led up to the court appearance. It offers unique opportunities to explore where there were gaps in services or other failings in systems that could have prevented violence in the relationship. And these courts connect victims and offenders with services they need to stop the violence and abuse in their relationships. The domestic violence court option has been proved effective in other parts of Canada, and women's organizations and others have been calling for a pilot in Prince Edward Island for ten full years.

While it is not in the Equality Report Card at present, it bears mentioning that another tool for meaningful violence prevention in PEI would be Child Death and Serious Injury Reviews and Domestic Homicide Reviews – processes that would go beyond coroners’ reports. These reviews could, like the Domestic Violence Court, look at the “big picture” better. They could look at the circumstances that led to death or serious injury, look at the context of the lives taken by violence, and see where things went wrong and what could have been done to prevent terrible consequences for families and communities.

Other violence prevention and elimination initiatives in the Report Card also come from PAC’s study, collaboration, and recommendations. One is the implementation of a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner program (SANE) in Island hospitals, an initiative we’re happy to say is making great headway towards at least one trained sexual assault nurse examiner in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and Prince County Hospital, with training available for nurses in rural PEI. Another is implementation of the Triple-P Positive Parenting Program for PEI. This is an evidence-based program for different levels of parenting support and intervention. More than 25 years of research and evidence show clearly that this program is an effective tool for preventing violence and abuse against children, and there is no better or more important investment government could make in our children’s future for healthy relationships than investing in this program to support good and healthy parenting. We hope to hear positive news about this essential prevention program soon.

The PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women has two primary roles in our legislated mandate: one is to advise government, as we do through the Equality Report Card and through conversations like the one we are having today. The other is to educate the public on issues important to the status of women.

For more than 20 years, the PEI Advisory Council on the Status of Women has coordinated the Purple Ribbon Campaign Against Violence. The campaign arose after the Montreal Massacre as a call to remembrance and action. If you have ever

worn a purple ribbon during the period between the International Day for Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women on November 25 and the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women on December 6, if you have ever worn a purple ribbon for PEI Family Violence Prevention Week in February, you have been part of this broad-based campaign to show support for victims and show commitment to ending all forms of family violence and violence against women and children. If anyone has ever asked you why you wore a ribbon, they have been touched by the campaign.

The Purple Ribbon Campaign receives support from the provincial government and the City of Charlottetown. Hundreds of volunteers from the Women's Institute and from across PEI pin ribbons to information cards and distribute them in their communities. We estimate that by the time the purple ribbon reaches you, it has been through five or six sets of hands. Each of those sets of hands has lovingly prepared the pin as a message of peace and non-violence, a message of commitment to preventing violence and abuse. In the last two years, we have also made the campaign more inclusive by developing multi-lingual posters focused on the campaign's theme.

Each year in recent years, the Advisory Council selects a theme for the Purple Ribbon Campaign, to provide a more focused message on one topic. This past year, the theme was "ASK. Sex without consent is a crime." We provided additional resources about the meaning of consent.

Is it an effective tool for preventing violence? Awareness raising is an important step. We work hard to give people tools and strategies to identify and prevent abuse – or to escape it if they are experiencing it. In the last five years, we have developed a teachers' resource guide for junior-high school teachers with resources for connecting messages about violence prevention and healthy relationships with their classroom curriculum. This is a good way of reaching out to youth, to share the message that violence is not acceptable. It is not a natural or inevitable part of the

culture. It is not something that “just happens.” And we continue to work for women’s equality in all areas of Island life.

If we want to prevent and eliminate violence, we must look at root causes and address inequalities. Unless we get to the root, violence will spring up again and again as family violence, as violence against women, and violence against children, and it will harm us all.

Violence prevention is life-saving work that benefits women, men, families, and communities. When we remember murdered women, on December 6<sup>th</sup> or any time we wear a purple ribbon, we make a commitment to first mourn, then work for change.