

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2007  
Ending Impunity for Violence against Women and Girls  
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Text for remarks by Todd Minerson, Executive Director  
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On December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1989, a man walked into the École Polytechnique, an engineering school in Montreal, Canada carrying a duffel bag. It was early afternoon, the last day before winter exams, and he calmly sat outside an administrative office for about two hours. Several people asked if he needed any assistance, or was looking for anyone, and he quietly declined their approaches. The tragedy that unfolded forever changed the way Canadians understand the issue of men's violence against women.

Over the next 45 minutes, 14 women were systematically murdered, separated from their male colleagues, and shot in their classrooms. Dozens more were injured, in a rampage specifically and methodically targeting women. As if to ensure his message was perfectly understood, the killer screamed "I hate feminists" throughout the ordeal, and left a manifesto listing some 20 other well-known Canadian women he planned to kill, if "only he had the time". After turning the gun on himself, and once the details became clear, Canadians began to ask challenging and difficult questions about our nation, and more specifically the question of men's violence against women.

Of course, many of these questions had been raised for some time by the dedicated and courageous women who had been working to end gender based violence for decades. Few people could comprehend the gravity and urgency with which we needed to address these issues like the tireless advocates, support, and intervention workers in this field. It should never take a tragedy of this magnitude to force us to examine the fundamental relations between men and women, but some important new questions also came to be asked, questions that are also being asked here at the United Nations today.

Where are the men?

What are our roles and responsibilities in ending violence against women and girls?

How do we address the complex constructions of masculinities that both perpetuate and tolerate gender based violence?

I hope to speak to some of these questions today, by sharing a bit with you about the White Ribbon Campaign, a global movement of men working towards ending men's violence against women and girls.

In 1991, as the second anniversary of the Montreal Massacre approached, three men in Toronto, were asking these questions to themselves. What emerged from these conversations and scraps of paper was the a symbol to represent men's commitment to end violence against women. The White Ribbon.

To this day, the White Ribbon symbolizes a man's pledge to never commit, condone, or remain silent about violence against women.

That first year in Canada, nearly 100,000 men wore the White Ribbon. By 2006, in excess of 800,000 ribbons were distributed, in 55 countries across the globe. With a staff of 5 people in Toronto, and thousands of participants around the world, the White Ribbon has become one part of an emerging global movement of men and women, who are looking at engaging men and boys in the effort to end violence against women and girls.

Our efforts are now focused on educating young people, raising public awareness, working in partnership with women's organizations; international facilitation and support, and most importantly challenging all men to examine their own beliefs, behaviors and attitudes towards gender based violence.

Our belief that working with men and boys may eventually result in the paradigm shift we need to achieve to end violence against women and girls is based on several guiding principles.

- 1) Men have both a **role and responsibility** in eliminating violence against women and girls. Gender based violence is a complex and complicated issue involving a wide range of factors embedded in culture, economy, law, war and conflict; and most intractably our cultural constructions of masculinities. Our global impunity towards violence against women and girls is pervasive and deeply rooted in these constructions of masculinities; on an individual, family and societal level, as well as in our institutions and cultures. If we accept this premise, men must both be **addressed** and **involved** in the effort in order to make the comprehensive social changes necessary to end this violence.
- 2) To foster meaningful change on a global level, The White Ribbon campaign operates on an extraordinarily decentralized model. Communities, however they are defined (be it a school, a village, a faith community, or a nation), are best suited to develop unique strategies for ending men's violence against women. It would be a fallacious claim to cultural competency for us to tell a community in Pakistan or Pretoria the best way to approach the issue in their own cultural context. Instead it is essential to remove barriers to sharing this work, nurture capacity building, and learn from past experiences.

3) Finally, our success will only be assured by how well we work in partnership with others doing this work, but particularly the women's movement. We have neither the time nor the resources to forge this path alone. The intent is not to create a new field of development work, or to divert resources from an already under resourced area. The goal is to move the notion of gender mainstreaming to a functional realization that gender means both women and men. We have a great deal to learn from women's organizations, who bring a history, and an acute understanding of gender dynamics to the work. Providing alternatives to existing gender dynamics necessitates new models of cooperation between women and men.

There will be challenges to this work. Many of the current efforts are project based, but change of this nature will require long-term commitment. The work needs to be multi-sectoral, and include sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, and fatherhood issues. Local and targeted intervention strategies need to be taken to scale. Long term evaluation work needs to be supported and conducted. There is a strong possibility for backlash and resistance. We are trying to change cultural constructions that have evolved over thousands of years.

But there is also hope. We have subtly shifted from having to justify the necessity of involving men and boys, to being asked to share our experiences. A global network called MenEngage, is actively looking to consolidate efforts across the planet around this work to foster capacity building, best practices, and resource sharing. Funders and governments are increasingly recognizing the importance of this work. And most importantly as witnessed by the White Ribbon Campaign, there are hundreds of thousands of men who are ready to assume their role and responsibility in ending violence against women and girls.

Ending impunity will be as much about empowerment, education and reclaiming safe spaces for women and girls as it is about dismantling male privilege, deconstructing masculinities, and providing positive alternatives for men and boys.

It is as much about support, intervention and economic independence for women and girls, as it is about education, prevention and providing the tools for effective intervention for men and boys.

If we are able to bring all of these elements together, we can realize a future that has no violence against women and girls.

