

# GUEST OPINION: The events of Dec. 6, 1989, continue to influence the woman I am

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People attend a vigil at Dalhousie in 2019 commemorating the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women. The event also marked the 30th anniversary of the shootings at Ecole Polytechnique, an engineering school in Montreal, where 14 women were murdered by a gunman who said he was fighting feminism. Ryan Taplin/SaltWire Network File Photo

STORY CONTINUES BELOW THESE SALTWIRE VIDEOS

*Editor's note: This letter is translated from the original French thanks to Jane Ledwell, executive director of the P.E.I. Advisory Council on the Status of Women. The French version of the letter is available on the [Actions Femmes Î.-P.-É. website](#).*

**Nathalie Vendrys**  
**Guest opinion**

After 32 years of silence, I am speaking to you today. Without knowing it, I have been carrying a heavy burden. I have unknowingly carried a burden that cut off my desire to speak, despite my willingness to act.

I have to speak to you, to share with you, to give words to what we don't want to hear. I have to tell you so that the words don't disappear; I have to tell you, to encourage you to exist, just as you are.

I took the time to write to you because I can no longer remain silent. Through living a rich and beautiful journey, filled with adventures and experiences beyond anything I could have imagined, I have gained perspective. Perhaps today I am freeing myself a bit. I was afraid, ashamed to say anything, ashamed to say nothing, ashamed even of being ashamed. Above all, I felt it wasn't my place to speak about it; but, nevertheless, Dec. 6, 1989, marked me. The events of Dec. 6, 1989, continue to influence the woman I am and perhaps the one you will become.

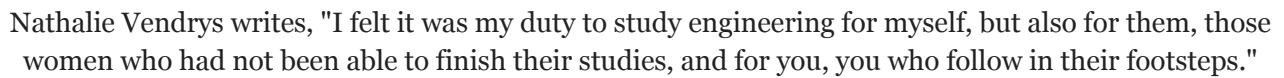
That evening, I was coming home from studying at my CEGEP, and the television started broadcasting images of the attack at the Polytechnique in Montreal. As if the images were engraved in my memory, I remember seeing those stretchers coming out of the faculty of engineering, seeing the students, the police, and the paramedics in a panic. People were crying... They were scenes of chaos.



In this 1989 file photo, a police tactical squad enters the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal to find that a lone gunman has killed 14 young women. - Postmedia News

Young women targeted, murdered, shot, here in Quebec. I remember that even the journalists and news readers were shaken and could not hide their emotions. I watched the confusion of images, confused myself. I was afraid. No one understood this scene, these events, in a school ... female engineers, young women barely older than me. The headlines and comments rolled past. I couldn't breathe. My chest tightened. My eyes were glued to the screen, to the deaths broadcast on the news, the unthinkable news: unthinkable, here in Quebec; unthinkable, in those days. My roommates were not home yet, and I was alone in the basement of our apartment, where I collapsed on an old armchair in the living room.

On Dec. 6, 1989, Montreal, 14 young women had just been murdered because they were women.



- Geneviève Bergeron, 21
- H       Colgan, 23
- Nathalie Croteau, 23
- Barbara Daigneault, 22
- Anne-Marie Edward, 21
- Maud Haviernick, 29
- Barbara Klucznik-Widajewicz, 31
- Maryse Lagani      , 25
- Maryse Leclair, 23
- Anne-Marie Lemay, 22
- Sonia Pelletier, 23
- Mich       Richard, 21
- Annie St-Arneault, 23

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I went to bed that night thinking about those young women, their families, their friends, their classmates... Of course, I thought it could have been me. Me: a woman, brown-skinned, and a future engineer. For each of these characteristics, a gun could have been pointed at me. It could have been me, but it had been them, and I was silently drowning in pain, anger, and fear. But I wasn't going to back down. My only certainty that night was that I would not back down from pursuing the destiny I had chosen for myself. I felt it was my duty to study engineering for myself, but also for them, those women who had not been able to finish their studies, and for you, you who follow in their footsteps. Because fear and hatred cannot rule our lives. Because those responsible for hateful acts cannot succeed in imposing their narrow and dangerous vision on the world.

For a long time, I didn't feel it was my place to speak out. For a long time, I told myself that since I wasn't there, inside those walls, at the time of the tragedy, I did not have a right to speak about it. I believe that this is the case for many of my engineering colleagues. We don't talk about it outside; but, inside, we live and relive it. Each Dec. 6, we struggle through the day, at best, with silent tears. Every year, I dread this day. Every year it triggers me, hits me deep inside. But we don't talk about openly. As if there was a some form of collective, convenient amnesia, an agreed-upon omission, a faultline or flaw we don't want to see.



Nathalie Vendrys, an engineer and osteopath from Montague, P.E.I., is shown in her graduation photo from December 1995. - Contributed

It's a mass of feelings we don't know how to deal with, but which gnaw at so many of us. I know many people who carry this same legacy as I do. Who, like me, are fighting to make our place in the world, to give you yours, to make space for women. But, like me for the last 32 years, they don't say anything either: my spouse; a colleague who was there at the time; friends. We are friendly and familiar with each other, professionally and personally, but nothing really comes out. We do not speak. Out of respect, out of denial – or because we are silently acting, with passion. To each their own.

Yes, there has been help for us. Those of us who lived through this shock wave indirectly pretended to absorb the trauma without saying anything, but it was nonetheless a collective trauma. We took the shock like good little soldiers because compared to the families and friends of the victims, how could we say anything? But we did not choose to be soldiers; we chose to be engineers. And yet I have been fighting a war ever since, every day. I have been fighting against prejudice and discrimination. My entire career I have come to encounter you, young women, and I will continue to do so. We have to keep moving forward... and never go backwards. I will continue to encourage you to become engineers, as women. I will tell you not to hesitate, to go for it, but I will also tell you to remember. To remember Dec. 6. To remember that nothing can be taken for granted, that everything remains fragile, that we have yet to attain our rights as women, our place in the world, our equality, that we have yet to banish the side-eyed looks and prejudices.

Many things have changed in 32 years, but the road is long. I open my heart to you today because, despite the pain, I am eager to walk a little way by your side. The global body of engineers will benefit from having you as its heart, and I call on your strength, your talent, your sensitivity, and, above all, your tenacity.

Together, let us honour the memory of our sisters who left too soon. Let us actively participate in a more just and inclusive society. Let us reach out to each other, to embrace, support, comfort, encourage, and congratulate each other.

On this day of remembrance, I share with you – you young women who will follow me – my memory and my hopes and my knowledge. May your paths take you higher in the clear blue sky than where 14 stars shine there. If you believe in yourselves as I believe in you, I know the "sky is the limit" for you. No glass ceiling will prevent us from being accepted for who we are, for who you are, just as you are.

*Nathalie Vendrys of Montague, P.E.I., is an engineer and osteopath, and has been involved with youth, especially the next generation of women in engineering and science, throughout her career. She is president of the board of directors of Actions Femmes Î.-P.-É. and is the P.E.I. representative on the board of directors of the Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne.*

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