



FACT SHEET

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CANADA

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Widespread gendered violence perpetrated against women is a flagrant abuse of women’s human rights. According to the ‘draft agreed conclusions’ of the 57th session of the Commission of the Status of Women (2013) at the United Nations, violence against women and girls is

...rooted in historical and structural inequality in power relations between women and men, and persists in every country in the world as a pervasive violation of the enjoyment of human rights ...and fundamental freedoms. [It occurs]...in public and private spheres, ...is...linked with gender stereotypes...and other factors that can increase women’s...vulnerability...¹

Despite decades of research and grassroots lobbying, violence against women remains one of the most persistent manifestations of misogyny and gender discrimination. Globally, including in Canada, women of all sectors of society are subjected to a vast array of physical, sexual, and psychological acts of violence by intimate partners, as well as stalking, rape and other sexual violence, sexual harassment, trafficking for the purposes of forced prostitution, female genital cutting, and femicide.² This *Fact Sheet* focuses on information about violence against women in Canada. It draws on academic research, together with community and government reports, but, due to the extensive literature available, is by no means exhaustive.

The dimensions of this violence are just beginning to be understood as new forms are recognised. A ground-breaking Statistics Canada survey in 1993³ (which has unfortunately not been repeated) estimated that 51% of Canadian women experienced at least one incident of sexual or physical assault since the age of 16. This figure masks important details showing that women experience multiple acts of male violence: 39% reported sexual assault, 29% physical and sexual violence by a marital partner, 16% by a dating partner, 23% by a friend or acquaintance, and 23% by a stranger. One-quarter of women who were physically assaulted by a spouse were also sexually assaulted. Eighty-seven percent of women had been sexually harassed and 80% of women aged 16-24 were sexually harassed in one year.

An abbreviated version of this *Fact Sheet* is also available on our website (www.criaw-icref.ca) under *Publications*.

La version longue ainsi que la version abrégée de ce *Feuille d’information* sont également disponibles en français sur www.criaw-icref.ca/fr.

Other Fact Sheets published by CRIAW that speak to violence against women are:

“Violence against Women and Girls”, 2002 and
 “Violence against Women and Girls, 2nd edition” 2002.

Both publications are available on our website.

These results were reported at a time when reducing violence against women and supporting survivors had a place on the political agenda. This new knowledge exposed the vast dimensions of women's experiences of male violence and helped to galvanize action which led to changes in government policy and support for the work of community and grassroots organizations. But knowledge about the dimensions and severity of violence against women and what needs to be done to ensure women's safety from violence very quickly became contested terrain. The recent neoliberal context has marginalized feminist voices and caused governments to claw back important feminist gains.⁴

Less extensive Canadian data gathering followed the 1993 survey on violence against women. At the federal government level the main source of information now is Statistics Canada's omnibus

crime victimization survey. It estimates that 6 per cent of women (600,000 women) were victims of marital violence in the 5 years prior to being interviewed in 2009 and 178,000 were assaulted by marital partners in the previous year.⁵ In addition, 460,000 women are sexually assaulted by men other than marital partners each year. Women are killed by intimate partners at a rate three times higher than men, and the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has documented 582 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal⁶ women. If this figure were applied proportionately to the rest of the female population there would be over 18,000 missing Canadian women and girls.⁷ At a time when gender inequality and other structural causes of violence against women are being erased from public discourse, political action is an urgent concern.

Violence Against Women is a Human Rights Issue

Violence against women violates women's fundamental rights to bodily integrity and freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. These rights are enshrined in human rights treaties ratified by Canada.⁸ Violence against women also constitutes a form of gender discrimination. International law requires countries to use due diligence to adopt measures to prevent, investigate, prosecute, and punish acts of violence against women and girls, and requires individuals and public officials to comply with the standards set out by human rights treaties.

For many years, women's organizations and national and international bodies have produced compelling evidence of the Canadian government's failure to live up to its treaty obligations to protect women from violence. Human rights violations affect all women but are particularly blatant for Aboriginal women and girls who suffer from historical and systemic

violence and disappearances stemming from failures in official responses, colonization, systemic racism, and social and economic conditions that perpetuate their vulnerability to violence. Numerous international treaty monitoring bodies have criticized Canada for its failure to address the human rights violations of Aboriginal women.⁹ In 2010-2011, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women conducted a study on violence against Aboriginal women and heard from over 150 witnesses about the long-standing discrimination and social and economic inequality that forms the context of this violence.¹⁰ Yet the final report failed to recommend meaningful action to address the marginalization of Aboriginal women that contributes to their vulnerability and to widespread tolerance of this violence from state officials, the media and the general public.

Repeated calls for a national inquiry into the disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women and girls have gone unheeded. The Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, established in 2010 by the Government of British Columbia to examine the police response to the cases of missing and murdered women in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver between 1997 and 2002, produced damning evidence of racist and discriminatory conduct on the part of law enforcement agencies. The Commission was strongly criticized by women's and Aboriginal women's organizations for failing to consult with Aboriginal groups on the mandate and scope of the inquiry and for failing to provide the funding needed to ensure meaningful participation by Aboriginal women.¹¹ Nevertheless, the Commission concluded that "the initiation and conduct of the missing and murdered women investigations were a blatant failure" due to discrimination, systemic institutional bias, faulty police practices, and political and public indifference.¹²

In 2013, Human Rights Watch investigated the relationship between the RCMP and Indigenous

women and girls in northern British Columbia where numerous women have gone missing or been found murdered on a stretch of road known as the Highway of Tears. They uncovered a "double failure of policing: widespread apathy by police toward disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women, as well as serious physical and sexual abuse against women and girls perpetrated by police themselves".¹³

This violence and abuse in northern British Columbia is not new: it occurs within a historical context of sexual abuse and exploitation and the failure of law enforcement to protect Aboriginal women.¹⁴ Understanding the context of this violence and working towards its elimination requires, as Kuokkanen argues, an examination of "the interconnections between indigenous self-determination and indigenous women's rights," and "a specific human rights framework that simultaneously accounts for indigenous self-determination and human rights violations of indigenous women."¹⁵

Key concepts defined

Women experience a wide range of different but related forms of violence:

- Physical violence – threats of violence, hitting with fists or weapons, kicking, slapping, beating, pushing, grabbing, strangling, choking, burning, and similar acts
- Sexual violence – rape, attempted rape, and any other form of sexual activity that is non-consensual or achieved through coercion, intimidation, force, or the threat of force
- Sexual harassment – unwanted sexual attention, pressure to comply with a sexually-oriented request in exchange for needed goods, threat of reprisals for refusal to comply with a sexually-oriented request, degrading

- and demeaning comments and gestures of a sexual nature in public or private places, public display of sexually offensive material
- Psychological abuse, emotional abuse, controlling behaviour – name calling, insults, humiliation, destruction of personal property, forced isolation, and similar acts designed to demean or restrict the woman's freedom and independence
- Financial abuse – limiting access to family or personal resources, depriving a woman of the wages she has earned, or preventing her from working outside the home
- Criminal harassment (stalking) – unwanted surveillance such as following or communicating, watching someone's home or

workplace, or direct threats to a third persons that cause a person to fear for their safety or the safety of someone else

- Femicide/feminicide – gender-based killing of women, for example intimate partner homicide
- Systemic violations of a group’s collective rights which “put the rights of individual... women of the group at risk”¹⁶ – “neoliberalism and development aggression, violence in the name of tradition, state and domestic violence, militarization and armed conflict, migration and displacement, and HIV/AIDS”¹⁷
- Various other forms including, but not restricted to, trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, sexual slavery, female genital mutilation/cutting, sex selective abortion, female infanticide, and early and forced marriage.

There are a wide variety of terms associated with violence against women, each with its own specific implications

The terms ‘domestic’ and ‘family’ violence include intimate partner violence but have also been used to describe acts between other individuals with familial relationships where the motives and conditions may differ somewhat from intimate partner violence. The term ‘spousal abuse’ is often used but this fails to incorporate violence that occurs between intimate partners who are not married or even cohabiting, such as dating partners and boyfriends. Some argue for ‘woman abuse’ to emphasize the gendered nature of the violence.¹⁸ For the purposes of this *Fact Sheet*, the term ‘intimate partner violence’ refers to physical and sexual violence, stalking, psychological/emotional abuse, controlling behaviours, and femicide perpetrated by current and previous intimate partners whether or not they are married or cohabitating. ‘Marital partners’ will be used for data sources that include in their definition married and common-law partners and exclude dates and boyfriends.

The term ‘sexual violence’ is used in this *Fact Sheet* to describe acts of rape, attempted rape, and other types of unwanted sexual acts involving

coercion, intimidation, threats or violence. ‘Rape’ refers specifically to acts of penetration without the woman’s consent.

The gender parity controversy

Gender symmetry in acts of intimate partner violence is an idea based on the belief that women and men perpetrate intimate partner violence at the same rate.¹⁹ This reading of the research ignores details which show that the types of violence experienced by women and men are vastly different; what is more, it removes acts of violence from a context where women do not benefit equally from social, economic and legal structures. Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey (GSS) is the most commonly cited source of prevalence data. The 2009 survey shows that women who reported marital violence were three times more likely than men to be sexually assaulted, beaten, choked, or threatened with a knife or a gun; more than twice as likely to be physically injured; six times more likely to receive medical attention; five times more likely to be hospitalized; and three times more likely to take time off paid or unpaid work as a consequence of the violence.²⁰ Women are three times more likely than men to be killed by intimate partners and 41 per cent of women who killed spouses were acting to defend themselves against a violent male partner.²¹ When these details are omitted from public documents or media reports, the actual nature of intimate partner violence is misrepresented.

Researchers find that intimate partner violence is not a single phenomenon but, rather, consists of distinct types which have different causes, patterns, and correlates. Sophisticated statistical analysis of the GSS reveals that women experience more variation than men in patterns of violence and abuse; women also experience a severe and chronic constellation of violence, coercive control, and verbal abuse involving high levels of fear and injury whereas men do not.²² Using a variety of data sources, other researchers confirm that violence perpetrated by men against women is more likely to involve a pattern of

physical violence and intimidation, emotional abuse, coercion and control, and often escalates

and continues after the women leave.²³

Data Challenges Lead to an Underestimation of Violence Against Women

Despite improvements in research methodologies, which have been largely driven by feminist researchers for the past thirty years, much of women's experiences of violence remain hidden.

Police statistics are a common source of information on violence against women, but they cannot provide valid estimates of the prevalence of violence because only 8% of sexual assaults and only 30% of women affected by marital violence report to the police.²⁴ Furthermore, police exercise discretion when deciding whether to proceed with an investigation and often fail to take these crimes seriously: 16% of reported sexual assaults in 2000 were declared unfounded by police, in comparison with 9% of other assaults, and therefore were excluded from published statistics.²⁵ Police also tend to report a series of ongoing, related incidents of partner violence as one single event and this, too, misrepresents the cyclical nature of this violence.²⁶

Population surveys are a key source of data on violence against women. The 1993 *Violence Against Women Survey*²⁷ was an example of a population survey dedicated to this topic while the General Social Survey on victimization covers many topics, including sexual assault and a module of questions on 'spousal' violence. Conducted every five years by Statistics Canada, this survey interviews a random sample of approximately 25,000 adults age 15 and older and so avoids the problems inherent in police statistics. Yet it has several limitations:

- The survey is conducted by telephone and only with landlines; consequently, women without private telephone access and those with only cell phones are excluded. This disproportionately affects young women, those living in institutions and shelters, and those in temporary or unstable living situations such as women fleeing abuse.
- Women living with violence may not be willing to disclose it over the telephone for fear of retaliation from the violent partner, or they may not be forbidden by violent partners from using the telephone.
- The survey is only conducted in French and English, which likely prevents the participation of 2.6 million women in Canada who, according to the 2006 Census, were not fluent in either of Canada's official languages.²⁸
- Interviewing procedures don't provide special consideration to enable women with disabilities to participate, which likely results in an underestimation for these women.
- The GSS measures violence by married or common-law partners only and thus fails to measure violence that occurs in dating relationships. Same-sex relationships are included but the sample size does not allow for detailed analysis.²⁹ Transgendered people are excluded altogether.
- The sample size is not large enough to distinguish country of origin for immigrants nor does it provide race/ethnicity in detail. Thus, all immigrants and all "visible minorities" are presented together in single categories.

Prevalence and Dimensions

The prevalence of intimate partner violence against women in Canada

Violence against women in intimate relationships continues to affect large numbers of women. The 2009 GSS found that 6% of Canadian women living in a marital or common-law relationship experienced physical or sexual assault by a partner during the previous five years, representing approximately 601,000 Canadian women.³⁰ Over half of these women (57%) were assaulted on multiple occasions.³¹ In addition, 11% of women reported experiencing criminal harassment (stalking) and were twice as likely as men to be stalked by current or former intimate partners. Three-quarters of women who were stalked by former partners had also experienced physical or sexual violence by former partners in the same time period.³² Stalking is a major risk factor for intimate partner femicide.³³

The greatest risk of homicide for women is in their own homes. Between 2000 and 2009, 714 women (49% of all femicides) were killed by intimate partners. By comparison, 215 men (7% of total homicides of men) were killed by intimate partners.³⁴

The large majority of reports of intimate partner violence are made by women. For example, in 2010, approximately 55,000 incidents of dating violence and 49,000 incidents of marital violence were recorded by the police; 70% of dating violence victims and 81 per cent of marital violence victims were female. Altogether, intimate partners account for a much larger share of all violent crimes against women than against men (55% for women and 22% for men).³⁵

The prevalence of sexual violence against women in Canada

Canadian women reported 460,000 incidents of sexual violence by persons other than marital partners to the 2009 GSS during the one-year

period studied. This represents a rate of 33 acts per 1,000 women, a figure that has not changed since the early 1990s. When types of sexual violence were recorded in two categories, 20% of all incidents were found to be sexual attacks involving the use of threats or physical violence, with the remainder (80%) involving unwanted sexual touching. In over half of these sexual assaults, the perpetrator was a friend, acquaintance or neighbour of the victim.³⁶

Among adult victims of sexual assault reported to police, 92% are women. Moreover, women knew the attacker in three-quarters of these assaults.³⁷ Contrary to women's comprehensive reports on the anonymous GSS survey, almost always only sexual assault at the lowest level is recorded by the police. For example, at the time of rape law reform in 1983, police recorded 88% of sexual assaults as level I (defined as assaults without weapons, bodily harm to the victim, or multiple perpetrators) and by 2007, 98% were recorded as level I.³⁸ According to independent research, many sexual assaults that involve injury and weapons and thus meet the criteria for levels II or III are classified by police as level I.³⁹ As a result, when these statistics are reported by Statistics Canada or by the police, they give a false impression of the seriousness of sexual violence. Following the 1983 law reform, it became impossible to identify cases involving penetrations (previously known as rape) from police statistics. However, because rape made up the majority of cases of sexual violence reported to police prior to 1983⁴⁰ (a smaller proportion were indecent assault), a similarly high number may be hidden within sexual assault level I but this is impossible to confirm.

Sexual exploitation and trafficking are difficult issues to study because they are clandestine activities. The RCMP estimates that approximately 600 women and children are trafficked into Canada each year for sexual exploitation, a figure that fails to account for the

number of women and children trafficked within Canada, a majority of whom are Aboriginal women.⁴¹

Global Dimensions of Violence Against Women

- Rape and intimate partner violence are tolerated violations of women's human rights in all countries. In addition to the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS), which was carried out in 11 countries⁴², and the 10-country study conducted by the World Health Organization⁴³, additional details are provided in country statements prepared for the 2013 UN Commission on the Status of Women 57 on 'Ending Violence Against Women and Girls'⁴⁴.
- Population surveys produce more reliable estimates than police statistics but decisions to disclose these experiences to interviewers are influenced by cultural context and feelings of vulnerability; thus reported figures may under-estimate the true prevalence.
- Over 100 million women are missing worldwide as a result of son preference and practices like female infanticide, sex-selective abortions, and systematic neglect of girls.⁴⁵ This figure is higher than the combined death toll of the First and Second World Wars.⁴⁶ The average birth ratio worldwide is 105 boys for every 100 girls, but in some countries it is skewed considerably in favour of boys: for every 100 girls, there are 117 boys in China, 111 in India, and 110 in Taiwan.⁴⁷
- In 2008 the WHO estimated that 91.5 million women and girls had been subjected to female genital mutilation/cutting in Africa alone.⁴⁸
- Sexual violence in armed conflict is a long-time strategy of warfare that is only recently coming to public awareness.⁴⁹ In 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security which urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate a gender perspective in all peace and security efforts and to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict.⁵⁰
- Violence against women is also a major contributor to injury, disease, and death. In Mexico City, rape and intimate partner violence were the third most important cause of illness and mortality.⁵¹ The state government of Victoria in Australia estimates partner violence to be the top contributor to the burden of disease among women under the age of 45, with mental health problems (such as depression, anxiety, and suicide) contributing the most.⁵² Similar research has not been undertaken in Canada.

Contexts and Contributing Factors

Violence against women is “never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable”⁵³; however, it is “understandable” in the sense that we now know a great deal about its root causes and social conditions. It is now well known that risk factors at the level of individuals are only part of the explanation: broader community and social factors such as poverty, sexism and racism, and deeply entrenched attitudes that tolerate violence towards women and excuse the behaviour of perpetrators⁵⁴ play critical roles.

Many factors interact with gender to raise the risk of violence and although they may not be direct causes of violence, they contribute to risks of victimization. For example, **younger women** under the age of 25 experience the highest incidence of intimate partner violence, sexual violence, femicide, and criminal harassment (stalking).⁵⁵ Aging, pregnancy and disability also present situations of vulnerability for women. **Women over the age of 65** are more likely than men of the same age to be victims of violence by marital partners.⁵⁶ Over a 5 year period, 63,300 or 11% of women experienced assault from a marital partner while **pregnant**.⁵⁷

Research on **violence against women with disabilities** is in its infancy. The 2009 GSS shows that women with an activity limitation, such as a condition or health problem that restricts her activities, had rates of marital violence almost twice as high as other women.⁵⁸ The DisAbled Women’s Network of Canada summarized the available research and concluded that women with disabilities experience the same types of violence as other women, but are vulnerable to additional types of abuse specific to their disability and face complex barriers to obtaining help.⁵⁹ For example, women with disabilities experience emotional, physical and sexual abuse by health care providers and others on whom they rely for support, as well as higher rates of emotional abuse from both strangers and other family members. They may be prevented from using a wheelchair, cane, respirator, or other assistive

devices. Because it is often assumed that women with disabilities do not have intimate relationships, partner violence is especially hidden. Women with disabilities are vulnerable to sexual abuse associated with violations of privacy, strip searches, sexual assaults by staff and other residents of institutions, forced abortion, and forced sterilization. Violence by attendants, when it is detected, is often treated informally and not brought to the attention of the police. When sexual assault and other forms of violence are investigated by police, the mental and physical abilities of women are often considered in establishing the perpetrator’s role in the assault, which can lead to victim blaming.⁶⁰

Alcohol and drugs are commonly found to be associated with women’s victimization but they are not *causes* of violence. They are factors that increase women’s vulnerability and are frequently used to render women incapable of defending themselves. Among women attending sexual assault treatment centres in Ontario, two-thirds had consumed alcohol immediately prior to the incident and 21% were suspected to have been drugged.⁶¹ Alcohol consumption creates a societal double standard whereby women are often held responsible for their own victimization when they’ve been drinking while intoxication reduces men’s responsibility as perpetrators.⁶²

Women in **male-dominated work environments** are vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. Over 200 female RCMP officers have brought a class action suit against the RCMP for gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment.⁶³ A report by the Canadian Forces Military Police tracked an increase in the incidence of marital violence, from 33 incidents in 2005 to 103 in 2008. The increase was especially acute at CFB Petawawa and coincided with the return of soldiers from Afghanistan in early 2007.⁶⁴ This correlation suggests that male-dominated hierarchical institutions and war-related experiences may influence the perpetration of marital violence.

Women who work in the sex industry are especially vulnerable to violence: between 1991 and 2004, police recorded the murders of 171 female sex workers and 45% of these were unsolved.⁶⁵ This undercounts cases of missing or murdered women that, because of sexism, racism, and tolerance of violence by law enforcement, are not counted as homicides.⁶⁶

Aboriginal women face interconnected disadvantages due to the impacts and intergenerational legacies of racism, colonization, residential schools, and cultural devaluation that contribute to vulnerability, intimate partner violence, sexual violence and femicide, and to the normalization of this violence.⁶⁷ Women in the territories experience higher rates of intimate partner violence and sexual assault,⁶⁸ and Aboriginal women throughout Canada report rates of physical and sexual violence and psychological abuse by intimate partners that are three times higher than those reported by non-Aboriginal women.⁶⁹ Aboriginal women are also more likely to experience very serious acts of violence, such as being hit with an object, beaten, strangled, sexually assaulted, or to have had a weapon used against them. Furthermore they are more likely to be injured and to report fearing for their lives, a fear that is very realistic given that Aboriginal women are eight times more likely to be killed by a partner than are non-Aboriginal women.⁷⁰ Although violence against women is rarely considered a hate crime, a 2013 beating and sexual assault of an Aboriginal woman in Thunder Bay, Ontario in the context of racism around the Idle No More movement is being treated by police as a hate crime.⁷¹ Under the Criminal Code, hate crimes are offences that are motivated by hatred towards a particular group based on race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. In 2010, police in Canada recorded only seven crimes where the person's sex was the primary motive and only three were violent crimes.⁷² However, women made up one-quarter of victims of all hate crimes, including 32% of incidents motivated by religion, 29% motivated by race or ethnicity, and 16% motivated by sexual orientation.⁷³

The 2004 Nunavik Inuit Health Survey in the Arctic region of Quebec found that half of women experienced sexual violence or attempted sexual violence in childhood and one-quarter have experienced the same as an adult; one-third of these women identified the perpetrator as an intimate partner.⁷⁴ The lack of basic health and social services in most Inuit communities across the North, combined with a housing crisis, unemployment, and poverty, exacerbates family tensions, often culminating in partner violence. In 2011, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples expressed deep concern about "the dire social and economic condition of the Attawapiskat First Nation, which exemplifies the conditions of many aboriginal communities in the country".⁷⁵

Many **immigrants and refugees** come to Canada having experienced the trauma of war and displacement which may be linked to experiences with family problems, including family violence.⁷⁶ For refugee and immigrant families, the pressure to maintain their culture, traditions, language, and religious practices may lead to violence if a member of the family begins to integrate into Canadian society in a way that conflicts with these values.⁷⁷ Low self-esteem, barriers to integration, and marginalization are some of the potential challenges of migration that may contribute to violence against immigrant and refugee women,⁷⁸ as does the fact that they often come as dependant family members.

LGBTQ individuals face intersecting oppressions based on gender and their status as a sexual minority.⁷⁹ The prevalence and causal factors for violence in LGBTQ communities are understudied areas. The 2009 GSS contains limited information for sexual minorities, finding only that women who identified as lesbian or bisexual were more than three times as likely as heterosexual women to have experienced spousal violence.⁸⁰ It has been suggested that violence in lesbian relationships may be related to internalized misogyny and homophobia.⁸¹

Constructions of Masculinities and Violence Against Women

Gender constructions play a central role in men's use of physical, sexual, and other forms of violence against women. Gender is not something that is fixed but is produced and reproduced in social interaction. How it plays out depends on patriarchal structures in the immediate community and broader society that grant men greater access to and control over power and authority.⁸² Constructions of masculine identities are fluid, changeable, and enacted in various ways depending on social context and social hierarchies determined by race, ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, level of ability, and geographic location.⁸³

Toughness and aggression are part of the socially-supported normative construction of dominant forms of masculinity. Research has shown that physical and sexual violence against women are more common behaviours among men who hold beliefs about rigid gender roles and male rights of entitlement over women and in societies where there is a strong ideology of male dominance over women, physical strength, and male honour.⁸⁴ Misogyny and varieties of violence toward women are resources available to restore masculine identity, in contexts where such behaviours are either kept private or are publicly encouraged.

The media in the form of music, television, movies, music videos, and the Internet present women in narrow sexualized ways along with powerful images of masculinity linked to degradation and violence toward women.⁸⁵ Pornography eroticizes this degradation and violence.⁸⁶ These negative images of women reinforce gender inequality and produce a set of societal relationships that create and sustain the social structures in which it is acceptable for men to use violence against women.⁸⁷

Impacts of violence against women

Women who experience violence face immediate and long-term impacts

Violence has serious consequences for women's physical, emotional, and reproductive health, physical safety, financial security, and ability to provide a safe secure environment for themselves and their children. The consequences and impacts of violence for women are many and varied and include, for example, physical injuries, internal injuries, gynecological problems, hospitalization, and difficulty carrying out daily activities.⁸⁸ Violence can also have fatal

consequences: for some women violence results in death, either through murder or suicide. Violence during pregnancy has been linked to an increased risk of miscarriage, premature delivery, and low birth weight.⁸⁹ Violence is also associated with drug and alcohol abuse and unsafe sex.⁹⁰

Psychological and emotional impacts of intimate partner violence on women include depression, stress anxiety, sleeping difficulties, feelings of shame, and fear for themselves and their children.⁹¹ One Canadian study found that 93% of female psychiatric in-patients had experienced at

least one severe incident of physical or sexual violence committed by a male partner.⁹²

Rape is a violation of the victim's body, her personal dignity and autonomy; as such, it has unique consequences. Immediate consequences include physical injury, shock, fear, anxiety, confusion, self-blame, and withdrawal. Long-term consequences include post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional detachment, flashbacks and nightmares, eating disorders, other mental health issues, sexual dysfunction, and substance abuse.⁹³ For reasons discussed earlier, sexual violence is infrequently reported and often kept hidden and silent. Thus many women do not receive the necessary help to deal with its impacts.

Violence against women has significant impacts on our society

A study by the Department of Justice estimates that the economic impact of marital violence

against women in Canada in one year is \$4.8 billion.⁹⁴ Victims shouldered the largest share (for costs associated with medical attention, lost wages, interrupted education, stolen and damaged property, and pain and suffering) followed by third-party costs (for social services such as shelters and rape crisis centres, addressing the impacts on children, and losses to employers) and costs to the criminal and civil justice systems.

Violence against women also affects future generations: 59% of women with children who experienced marital abuse reported that their children witnessed the violence; in half of these cases, children witnessed violence severe enough to result in injury and in half the mother feared for her life.⁹⁵ Witnessing intimate partner violence as a child can be emotionally and psychologically damaging and can contribute to the likelihood that male children will perpetrate violence and female children will be victimized by partners once they are adults.⁹⁶

Seeking Help

Women seek help in a variety of ways

Women assaulted by intimate partners are more likely to seek help from friends and family than from formal sources such as police or counsellors. According to the 2009 GSS, two-thirds of women disclosed the violence to family members and about 60% sought help from friends. Only about 30% sought help from a counsellor and a similar percentage talked to a doctor or nurse.⁹⁷ Merely 30% reported to the police. Even very serious violence is often not reported: only 60% of women who were beaten, choked, or had a weapon used against them and 53% of women who were sexually assaulted by a marital partner sought help from the police.⁹⁸ The police response is often ineffective in stopping the violence: about 30% of women who reported to police said the

violence remained the same or increased following police contact.⁹⁹

Emergency and longer-term shelters are essential for providing women with housing and immediate safety as well as offering safety planning, counselling, information, and advocacy. The growth in shelters has been steady since the first one opened in the 1970s, but there is a continuing problem of accessibility to shelters for women with disabilities.¹⁰⁰ In 2010, there were 593 shelters for abused women in Canada; 146 offered services to women on reserves, yet only 79% of these were able to offer culturally sensitive services.¹⁰¹ Among other shelters, 59% offered culturally sensitive services for Aboriginal women.

Over a one-year period between April 1, 2009 and March 31, 2010, 64,500 women and 39,200

children were admitted to shelters in Canada.¹⁰² Almost one-third of these women had stayed in a shelter before, an increase from 25% of women in 2008. On just one randomly selected day, April 15, 2010, there were 4,645 women and 3,611 children residing in shelters. Despite their increasing numbers, there is still a large gap between what is available and what is needed: on that single day in April 2010, a total of 426 women were turned away, half because the facility was full. Nor are shelters able to assist all women who seek help: 18% were turned away because the shelter was unable to accommodate their mental health problems or drug or alcohol problems.¹⁰³

Per capita rates of shelter use are much higher in the territories than in the provinces. For example, shelter use in 2010 was over 12 times higher than the national average in the Northwest Territories, almost 10 times higher in Nunavut, and almost nine times higher in the Yukon.¹⁰⁴

In addition to shelters, women may seek help from police-based and court-based victim services and sexual assault centres. During the one-year period between April 1, 2009 and March 31, 2010, 711 victim service agencies assisted 410,000 victims of crime; three-quarters were women.¹⁰⁵ For over half of the women seeking help for a violent crime (54%) the perpetrator was an intimate partner.

In 2008, there were 134 sexual assault or rape crisis centres in Canada. These centres assisted almost 81,000 victims in a one-year period and 1,134 on a single day. These figures underestimate the true number of women who seek help from these services because some agencies did not respond to this survey.¹⁰⁶

Women's experiences of violence and help-seeking are shaped by myriad factors related to their intersecting identities, the severity and frequency of abuse, fear of retaliation, economic circumstances, level of ability, shame and embarrassment, availability and accessibility of services, impacts on their children (including

threats or manipulation involving children), concerns about domestic animals left behind, and available social supports.¹⁰⁷ Women with disabilities may face accessibility challenges when trying to leave violent relationships because of inaccessible transportation or lack of appropriate means of communication such as Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf, for example.¹⁰⁸ They may also face difficulties accessing information or contacting shelters or other services, worry about losing their financial security, housing or welfare benefits, and fear being institutionalized.¹⁰⁹

Racialized and minority women face barriers obtaining help due to stereotyping and labeling, lack of culturally competent services, financial and language barriers, and racism and discrimination. A study with young women of colour in Toronto found that one-in-five experienced racism in the health care system which included cultural insensitivity, racial slurs, and poor quality care.¹¹⁰ A pan-Canadian study by the Health Council of Canada to create culturally competent care for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people found that one of the most important factors contributing to negative health among Aboriginal people is that many don't trust and therefore don't use mainstream health care services.¹¹¹ This lack of trust stems from experiences of stereotyping and racism, and from a perception that mainstream approaches are alienating and intimidating. Aboriginal women tend to view violence in the home as "family violence" and may find that mainstream services are at odds with their wish to address the problem holistically.¹¹² As a result, Aboriginal women may look outside formal services in an attempt to manage or end the violence in their lives.¹¹³

For immigrant and refugee women, seeking help presents many complexities including fears that reporting violence may put the family's immigration status in jeopardy.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, women who have had negative experiences with authorities in their country of origin often avoid engaging with Canadian authorities. In addition,

women from collectivist societies may avoid asking for outside help if it means bringing shame upon their family and community.

Lesbian and bisexual women and transgendered people may be deterred from seeking help for fear of facing discrimination, or of having their sexual orientation or gender identity disclosed or used against them.¹¹⁵

Women often suffer secondary victimization when they turn to the police, social services, friends, or family if, as can happen, they are not believed, blamed or made to feel responsible for the violence, or subjected to callous or insensitive treatment, when police fail to take evidence, or

when their cases are dropped arbitrarily.¹¹⁶ This can deter them and other women from reporting in the future.

Despite decades of awareness-raising, blatant biases against women who are sexually assaulted continue to colour the treatment of these cases in the criminal justice system. Many legal scholars describe how myths about women and rape—such as the belief that women who have had prior sexual relations are less reliable and credible, or that when women say no they really mean yes, or that certain women “deserve what they get”—have skewed the law’s treatment of sexual assault.¹¹⁷

Addressing Violence Against Women

Responses

Making real change to eliminate and, in the meantime, address violence against women requires commitment and a focus on the diversity of women’s lived experiences. For example, services must find a way to address the needs of women who come to Canada as immigrants or refugees or have experienced sexual violence in the context of war or displacement.¹¹⁸ A study of social services in Montreal found that culturally-specific services exist but are not implemented systematically, and that service providers often do not recognize structural factors that might compound intimate partner violence in immigrant communities.¹¹⁹

A recent study by the DisAbled Women’s Network of Canada outlined the need to improve shelter accessibility for women with physical and psychological disabilities. While most shelters in the study did their best to accommodate women,

they cited the lack of funding as the greatest hurdle in improving accessibility.¹²⁰

To serve the needs of the diverse Canadian population, responses to violence against women must be culturally competent, and focus on respect for basic values, traditions and beliefs. Moreover those who respond or provide services must be aware of their own preconceptions.¹²¹ In response to the need for culturally-competent approaches, various organizations in a number of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities have implemented a range of programs that integrate both contemporary practices and cultural traditions to respond to the needs of victims, perpetrators of violence, extended families, and communities. These programs may include talking circles, spiritual support, and counselling provided by elders.¹²²

Specialized Domestic Violence Courts

The criminal justice system has undergone major changes over the past thirty years in its responses to intimate partner violence. Pro-arrest policies are in force in police departments across the country and there are specialized units to respond to intimate partner violence in some jurisdictions. Domestic violence courts have been implemented in several provinces and the Yukon Territory. Among the several interrelated objectives of these courts are: improving the speed and certainty of prosecution; providing early intervention for low-risk offenders; vigorous prosecution for serious and repeat offenders; increasing offender accountability through appropriate sentences and treatment; and improving support to victims. Court-based victim services and partner assault treatment programs have grown rapidly alongside domestic violence courts.¹²³

Evaluations of these specialized courts have found improvements in their functioning when compared with results from traditional approaches. These include:¹²⁴

- A rise in the number of cases reported to the police
- Higher rates of guilty pleas
- A rise in mandated treatment for abusers
- A decline in the number of cases dropped by the police and prosecutors
- Enhanced training of police and Crown attorneys
- Improved support for victims throughout the criminal justice process and through referrals to community agencies

Despite some improvements, aggressive criminal justice policies have not resulted in better outcomes for all women. For example, the effects of these policies on recidivism are not large. As well, they can result in women being charged and convicted alongside or instead of violent partners and thereby denied services or in women losing custody of their children because they are labelled as abusers rather than victims.¹²⁵ Most men are ordered by the court to participate in treatment programs and thus do not receive help unless they are reported, tried, and convicted. Evaluations of treatment programs are mixed: they can work for some men to reduce violence, but overall the effects are small and uneven.¹²⁶

Some have criticized pro-prosecution policies for paternalistically presuming to know what is right for women and by re-victimising them through forced participation in the prosecution process.¹²⁷ Often there is a gap between what women expect from the criminal justice system and the actual outcomes.¹²⁸ For example, many women call the police for immediate safety which does not always signify a wish for prosecution.¹²⁹ Furthermore, aggressive prosecution policies increase the power of the criminal justice system and do not always make women safer; nor do they address the systemic nature of violence against women or improve gender equality.¹³⁰

Prevention

Efforts to prevent violence against women in Canada have been piecemeal, incremental, and poorly funded. For prevention to be effective, violence against women must be recognized as a gender and human rights issue, rather than as a problem for individual women. Preventing violence against women also requires a coordinated effort at the level of women's social environments that addresses root causes. This includes engaging everyone to critically reflect on male power and privilege; to work to change negative attitudes toward women; and to construct and promote positive masculinities and femininities. Men have an important role to play in acting as positive role models for young men and boys in fostering healthy models of masculinity. Likewise, men must be engaged to reflect on and recognize the costs of gender-based violence, not only to women and girls but also to men and boys, and the benefits of gender equality for women and for men.¹³¹

One approach to prevention that shows promise in creating change at the individual, community, and societal levels is to engage bystanders. This approach encourages men and women to be on the lookout for social situations that create the risk of violence, to challenge sexist attitudes and behaviours, to intervene safely in potentially violent situations, and to provide support to victims.¹³² By engaging both men and women to recognize and change aspects of the environment that tacitly or overtly condone violence against women, bystander approaches are a promising strategy for producing lasting changes in social and cultural norms.¹³³

Public education campaigns can also potentially play an important role in raising awareness and challenging social norms because they are able to reach a wide audience. Rather than holding women responsible for avoiding dangerous situations, campaigns that challenge conventional norms about masculinity are increasingly placing responsibility on young men to avoid using violence. Some, like Be More than a Bystander, a collaboration between the Ending Violence Association of British Columbia and the BC Lions football club, engage high profile men in stereotypically masculine pursuits in publicly challenging norms that equate masculinity with violence. Other examples are:

- White Ribbon Campaign (www.whiteribbon.ca)
- Bringing in the Bystander (<http://www.unh.edu/preventioninnovations/index.cfm?ID=BCC7DE31-CE05-901F-0EC95DF7AB5B31F1>)
- Ça commence avec toi, ça reste avec lui (<http://commenceavecstoi.ca>)
- Kizhaay Anishinaabe Niin, Ojibway for I am a Kind Man (www.iamakindman.ca)
- My Strength is not for Hurting (www.mystrength.org)
- Coaching Boys into Men (www.futureswithoutviolence.org/content/features/detail/811/)
- The Fourth R (<http://youthrelationships.org>)
- The Consensual Project (www.theconsensualproject.com)
- Walk a Mile in her Shoes (www.walkamileinhershoes.org)

Conclusion

Forty years after grassroots women's organizations brought the magnitude and multiple dimensions of women's experiences of violence to public awareness and pressured governments to respond with anti-violence policies, violence against women continues to be widely tolerated. This violence will not be eradicated until governments, the media, and the general public

acknowledge the seriousness of the problem; commit to addressing the root causes; develop a coherent national strategy in collaboration with women's organizations, Aboriginal women's organizations, and other relevant stakeholders; mandate appropriate budgetary and other resources; and commit to carrying through with these programs and policies.

Additional Resources

- The Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children (www.crvawc.ca)
- The Freda Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children (www.harbour.sfu.ca/freda)
- RESOLVE: Research and Education for Solutions to Violence and Abuse (www.ucalgary.ca/resolve), (www.umanitoba.ca/resolve), and (www.uregina.ca/resolve)
- Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research (www.unbf.ca/arts/CFVR)
- Canadian Women's Foundation (<http://www.canadianwomen.org/facts-about-violence>)
- Le centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la violence familiale et la violence faite aux femmes (www.criviff.qu.ca)
- Centre for the Study of Social and Legal Responses to Violence (www.violenceresearch.ca)
- The White Ribbon Campaign (www.whiteribbon.ca)
- Assaulted Women's Helpline (www.awhl.org or call toll-free at 1-866-863-0511)
- Femaide: Crisis Line for Women Who are Victims of Violence (www.femaide.ca or call toll-free at 1-877-336-2433)
- Canadian Network of Women's shelters and Transition Houses (www.endvaw.ca)
- The Victim Support Line (call toll-free at 1-888-579-2888)

This Fact Sheet was made available to you today thanks to the dedication of a large number of unpaid volunteers who've devoted their time and energy in order to educate and assist government, policy makers, individuals, non-profit groups and many more.

CRIAW-ICREF is a non-profit organization providing tools to facilitate organizations taking action to advance social justice and equality for all women. We are working to create a world in which individuals of all genders, races, cultures, languages, incomes, abilities, sexualities, religions, identities, ages, and experiences fully partake of, and contribute to, a just, violence-free, balanced and joyful society that respects the human dignity of all. **And we've been doing so for 37 years.**

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ISSN 1917-8581

September 17, 2013