

This fact sheet explores violence against women (VAW) in the context of COVID-19 in Canada. This fact sheet is part of a series looking at the impacts of COVID-19 on women in Canada using an intersectional analysis.

Introduction:

Many women in Canada continue to face violence every day (Johnson & Colpitts-CRIAW-ICREF 2013; Bardswich 2019). Structural social inequalities, including sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ageism, ableism, and many other factors, perpetuate VAW (Status of Women Canada 2019). Women experience a wide range of different but related forms of violence: Physical violence; Sexual violence; Sexual harassment; Psychological abuse; Financial abuse; Femicide; Criminal harassment; and other forms (Johnson & Colpitts-CRIAW-ICREF 2013, pg 4).

Data suggest that 7 in 10 victims of family violence are women and girls (Statistics Canada 2016). Indigenous women are three times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women (Status of Women Canada 2019). Women with a disability were twice as likely as women without disability to have been a victim of violent crime (Cotter 2018). Women accounted for almost 8 in 10 victims (79%) of intimate partner violence—according to police-reported intimate partner violence in Canada, 2018 (Burczycka 2019). 19% of women experienced harassment in their workplace compared to 13% of men in the past year, including verbal abuse, humiliating behavior, threats to persons, physical violence, and unwanted sexual attention or sexual harassment (Hango & Moyser 2018).

Since the lockdown began, we see an increase in VAW cases that have caused a profound impact on women. From May 18 to July 20, 2020, the Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA-Canada) & anova surveyed 376 VAW staff and volunteers. The survey reported that 46% of VAW staff and volunteers found changes in violence prevalence and severity amidst the pandemic (Trudell & Whitmore 2020, pg 20). There is currently limited information about pandemic related VAW; more research is required to get an accurate picture of this issue.

Why women are at risk of facing violence during a pandemic:

Pre-existing systemic gender barriers are the leading cause of increasing violence against women (VAW) in Canada (Johnson & Colpitts-CRIAW-ICREF 2013). For example, women earn less than men (Pelletier et al. 2019) and therefore save less, perform a disproportionate amount of unpaid care and household work (homeschooling, elder care, household chores). COVID-19 has further exacerbated this situation. As we know, 1.5 million women lost their jobs amid the pandemic (Royal

Bank of Canada 2020). Research suggests that women with low or no income are at greater risk of experiencing violence (Johnson & Colpitts- CRIAW-ICREF-2013). Also, being stuck at home non-stop during lockdowns with abusers, many women have less access to relevant support and connections with friends, co-workers, and family, access to a phone/internet, unsafe housing, and many more issues have been raised before and during this pandemic but are portrayed as isolated issues. The EVA-Canada & anova study found that some tactics used by abusers, such as isolation at home as a tool to engage violence and exercise control, are both conditions exacerbated by COVID-19 (Trudell & Whitmore 2020, pg10).

Rise in VAW amidst COVID-19 pandemic:

Data are already showing a rise in VAW reporting amidst COVID-19 (Shelter Voices 2020); however, the number of crisis calls reported have varied throughout the pandemic. A survey by Shelter Voices-Women's Shelters Canada (2020) suggests a decrease in crisis calls during phase-I of the lockdown period (March-May 2020), while an increase in the calls in phase-II (June-October 2020) after the eased of lockdown measures. This indicates that it was impossible or more difficult for some women to reach out for help or leave their places during the lockdowns. They might have limited access to women's shelters/health services and limited access to technology. The EVA-Canada & anova reports a sharp uptick in violence cases since the lockdown started (Trudell & Whitmore 2020).

Similarly, the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH), which represents more than seventy shelters across Ontario, reported that 20% of their organizations had experienced an increase in crisis calls. The Vancouver-based Battered Women's Support Services (BWSS) reports, "calls have increased by 300 percent as the crisis line is now open 24/7 and as COVID-19 exposes more victims to danger and lethality for having to stay at home. Most calls from the crisis line are from victims and survivors, family members, children and youth, and co-workers. Forty percent of callers are calling for the first time." (BWSS 2020). This might be because many women may not have access to safe housing facilities, lack income, and were forced to stay with their abusers, which has exacerbated VAW cases during this pandemic (Shelter Voices 2020).

Not all women have experienced violence in a similar way. Women with disabilities, First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women, Black and racialized women, older women, non-status, immigrant and refugee women, trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people, women in the sex industry, and women experiencing economic and housing precarity are more likely to face violence (Community Foundations of Canada 2020). At the same time, these women might also face additional barriers in getting access to VAW services that may overlook their unique needs.

Therefore, the recovery efforts to address GBV must consider the intersecting experiences and risks of gender-based violence of diverse groups of women.

Response and challenge to VAW during a pandemic:

The federal government of Canada announced \$50M towards women's shelters. This is an important and necessary funding increase (CRIAW-ICREF 2020). However, with the pandemic and a rise of violence, shelters, and other support services are caught between limited funding and the enormous challenge to meet growing demand. (Shelter Voices 2020). A new survey conducted by Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW-ICREF) with YWCA Canada, Canadian Women's Foundation, G(irls)20, and Oxfam Canada suggests that due to lack of funding, 51% of organizations had to cut back on vital services, and 48% had to cancel some of their programming and had challenges to virtually delivery their programs (CRIAW-ICREF et al. 2020, pg 4).

Despite limited resources, women's organizations across Canada are working 24/7 to deliver support to VAW survivors. Few names include: Battered Women's Support Services (BWSS) BC, runs 24/7 crisis line and survivor's safety programs to provide support to women experiencing gender-based domestic violence such as; emergency shelters, social media safety, cell phone safety, etc. ShelterSafe offers an online resource and connects women fleeing violence to their closest women's shelter 24/7 (ShelterSafe 2020). The pandemic has also put additional financial stress on women shelters, purchasing hygiene products, personal protective equipment (PPE), computers, internet services, and other COVID-19 related items (Shelter Voices 2020).

Receiving concrete VAW data is a major challenge. Not all women report the abuse. The leading cause for this is the stigma associated with being a VAW victim, insecurity, fear, victim-blaming, and family pressure – all of which prevent women from reporting, and none of which are new. Studies have shown that VAW has long-term impacts on women, such as societal stigma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mental health, etc. This might limit women's performances and widen the gender inequality in the time of COVID-19 and after. VAW affects not only women's individual lives but also their children, family, and community.

VAW is an obstacle to women's advancement (CRIAW-ICREF 2020), and ending VAW is urgent. Address violence against women requires commitment and a focus on the diversity of women's lived experiences (Johnson & Colpitts-CRIAW-ICREF 2013, pg 13). The current solutions to VAW mostly concern post-VAW interventions such as; shelters, referrals, penalties to perpetrators, and other services. More policies and programs focusing on VAW prevention are needed to address VAW from our community and society.

Recommended actions to end VAW:

- Implement a well-funded national action plan on violence against women with key indicators and guided by a robust feminist Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) process.
- Core funding to women's organizations providing services, programs, advocacy, and research on VAW.
- Apply an intersectional feminist lens while designing, formulating, implementing, and monitoring VAW programs and projects.
- Work to end all forms of inequality and discrimination. Intersecting inequalities, like economic inequality, racism not only make women more vulnerable to violence but also impacts their ability to perform. Ending VAW requires a multi-pronged approach that must involve full enjoyment of all human rights and equality.
- Expand a record of VAW disaggregated data by gender, race, ethnicity, location, age, income, ability, occupation, etc.

More VAW resources:

- Ending Violence Association of Canada & Anova: <https://endingviolencecanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FINAL.pdf>
- Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI): <https://ocasi.org/gender-based-violence>
- The Women's Sector & COVID-19: [https://www.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/The-Women%E2%80%99s-Sector-%26-COVID-19-Briefing-Note-Dec-2020%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/The-Women%E2%80%99s-Sector-%26-COVID-19-Briefing-Note-Dec-2020%20(1).pdf)
- Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIA W-ICREF): https://www.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/VAW_ENG_longFinal.pdf
- Women's Shelters Canada: <https://endvaw.ca/archives/news/>
- Feminist Deliver: <https://feministsdeliver.com/feminist-economic-recovery/>
- UN WOMEN: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>
- National Action Plan on Violence Against Women & Gender Based Violence: https://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Reissued-Call-NAP-on-VAW.GBV_.pdf
- Center for Global Development: <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/covid-19-and-violence-against-women-and-children-second-research-round>

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