

COVID-19 and the Increase of Domestic Violence against Women

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As is the case in many other countries, domestic violence has likely increased in Canada since lockdowns began. A Statistics Canada survey in April found that 1 in 10 women in Canada are “very or extremely concerned about the possibility of violence in the home.”¹ A survey in May from the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) found that 1 in 5 Indigenous women have experienced domestic violence since the pandemic began.² While reliable nationwide data on service use is not yet available, police in some regions have reported significant increases in domestic violence calls as well.

Frontline domestic violence organizations are reporting varying service use trends in different regions. A consultation with service organizations led by the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality Canada found that in some regions, calls to these services are up by 20 to 30 percent, with some shelters reporting increases in calls as high as 400 percent. Many shelters in major urban centres are reaching capacity and have been forced to refer women elsewhere.

This was common before the pandemic, but anecdotal reports from Toronto and Vancouver in particular indicate that shelters have even fewer spaces available now. In some cases, this is because shelters have had to reduce capacity in order to comply with public health guidelines. Moreover, because provincial border crossings have been restricted in parts of the country, some women have had a harder time accessing services in a neighbouring province, even when those services are closer than those in their home province.

Other organizations, however, especially those in the northern territories, have reported a drop in calls and a significant drop in intakes since the pandemic began. This may be the result of misinformation about what services are still available, and/or the difficulty of calling service providers when a victim is at home fulltime with an abusive partner. As a result, some domestic violence service providers anticipate a spike in calls after lockdowns begin to lift.

Some organizations have offered innovative adaptations for services during the pandemic. Certain shelters are offering text and chat lines that were not available

¹ Statistics Canada. *The Daily: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 1: Impacts of COVID-19*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200408/dq200408c-eng.htm>, April 8, 2020.

² NWAC. *News & Press Releases: Violence against Indigenous women during COVID-19 sparks calls for MMIWG plan*. <https://www.nwac.ca/violence-against-indigenous-women-during-covid-19-sparks-calls-for-mmiwg-plan/>, May 12, 2020.

before. The Canadian Women's Foundation has invested in advertising a hand symbol that women can make while on video calls to indicate they are experiencing violence.

The federal government invested \$40 million (CDN) at the start of the pandemic to help domestic violence shelters adapt their facilities to meet safety standards. They also made \$10 million (CDN) available to domestic violence shelters on First Nations reserves, but no funding was made available for Inuit-specific shelters. Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, an organization representing Inuit women and girls in Canada, urged the government to fund five new Inuit shelters in Inuit Nunangat and Ottawa, which was also recommended in last year's Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Even with additional funding, many shelters have had to cancel fundraising events and have seen a drop in revenue from donations and charitable giving. The shelter networks in New Brunswick have also indicated that more shelter workers and other service providers are quitting or have had to stay home during the pandemic.³ It is unclear if this is happening in other provinces and territories but even before COVID-19, wages for anti-violence workers were insufficient and working conditions were poor. As a result, there is high staff turnover in the sector, which compromises services for women fleeing violence. Domestic violence organizations are in dire need of more operational funding from provinces to increase wages, recruit more workers, and expand services.

There has been little action from employers in Canada to address domestic violence for workers working from home since the pandemic began, despite significant progress on recognizing domestic violence as a workplace issue in recent years. In 2014, the Canadian Labour Congress published research with Western University's Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children, on the impact of domestic violence at work.

Since then, labour unions have advocated strongly for domestic violence protections. Many have worked with shelters to train worker representatives on addressing domestic violence. Canadian unions have also negotiated paid domestic violence leave, workplace advocates, and protection from retaliation for workers experiencing domestic violence in collective agreements. Workers in almost every Canadian jurisdiction now have access to two to five days of paid domestic violence leave, as well as additional unpaid leave, through employment standards legislation (please [click here](#) to view a map of the domestic violence leaves throughout Canada).

³ CBC. *Domestic violence shelters in financial crisis because of COVID-19 'pandemic within a pandemic.'* <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/covid-19-domestic-violence-shelters-new-brunswick-funding-1.5555928>. May 7, 2020.

However, Canada has yet to ratify International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention C-190 on violence and harassment in the world of work, a process that requires the agreement of each province and territory. There has also not been a judicial test in Canada to establish employer responsibilities for workers' safety from domestic violence while working from home during the pandemic, as there has been in Australia.

In Canadian jurisprudence more generally, "the workplace" is broadly defined to include anywhere that work takes place. Therefore, since people are working from home as mandated by their employer, there is a responsibility for employers to ensure a safe workplace that would presumably include safety from domestic violence.

Governments and employers in Canada must do more to ensure safety for workers impacted by domestic violence during the pandemic and beyond. There needs to be an explicit recognition that workers are more vulnerable to domestic violence while being ordered to stay home, and concrete actions must be taken to mitigate risks associated with domestic violence that workers are exposed to.

Employers must:

- Communicate with workers about domestic violence and provide resources on supports available from employers and service organizations.
- Train workers and employers to recognize and respond to domestic violence.
- Develop relationships with service providers in order to properly refer workers exposed to domestic violence to supports.
- Create safety plans with service providers for workers experiencing domestic violence, and adapt existing safety plans to the pandemic context.
- Engage professionals to conduct risk assessments and make recommendations for safety precautions when a worker is experiencing domestic violence.
- Ensure that Employee Assistance Programs include access to domestic violence specialists that are readily available during the pandemic.
- Allow flexibility in access to work sites and office space for workers who may be impacted by domestic violence.

Governments in Canada must:

- Increase operational funding for first and second stage domestic violence shelters. This funding must be sustainable and not restricted to the pandemic period.
- Encourage recruitment of frontline domestic violence workers to improve services by increasing wages.
- Allow exceptions to provincial border crossing restrictions for women fleeing domestic violence.
- Make funding available to build and service domestic violence shelters for Inuit women in Inuit Nunangat and Ottawa.
- Develop a National Action Plan on Violence Against Women and Girls.
- Ratify ILO Convention C-190 on violence and harassment in the world of work.
- Amend provincial and territorial tenancy acts to allow for people fleeing domestic violence to break their lease without penalty.
- Address service discrepancies across and between jurisdictions by creating a national framework with provinces and territories. This would require aligning capital funding (federal) with operational funding (provincial), and standardizing services across provinces.

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