

Brief on Canadian Response the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prepared by the Ending Violence Association of Canada¹
for submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Industry, Science and
Technology

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¹ This brief was prepared by Erin Whitmore, Executive Director, Ending Violence Association of Canada. The brief is submitted on behalf of the Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA Canada) including the Ending Violence Association of BC; Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services; Sexual Assault Services of Saskatchewan; Ending Violence Across Manitoba; Ontario Network of Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centres; Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses; Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres; Association Québécoise Plaidoyer-Victimes; Avalon Sexual Assault Centre; Sexual Violence New Brunswick; Prince Edward Island Rape and Sexual Assault Centre; Newfoundland and Labrador Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre; Yukon Status of Women Council.

About the Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA Canada)

The Ending Violence Association of Canada (EVA Canada)² is a national organization that works to address and respond to gender-based violence. EVA Canada strives to strengthen collaboration among national, provincial, and territorial organizations to build understanding about gender-based violence and advocate at the national level. With representation from sexual assault, domestic violence, and gender-based violence organizations and regional and provincial networks from all of the provinces and the Yukon, EVA Canada members have a long history of advocating for changes to strengthen policies, legislation, and systems to better respond to the needs of survivors of gender-based violence across the country. Our members deliver direct service to survivors of gender-based violence; provide prevention, education, and awareness programming; conduct research and policy development; and strive to build a world free from gender-based violence. They have been on the frontlines of the pandemic providing support to survivors, and addressing the challenges of sustaining anti-violence organizations during this unprecedented time.

Introduction

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, EVA Canada has witnessed the distinct impacts the pandemic holds for organizations and services dedicated to addressing and responding to gender-based violence, and for those at risk for or experiencing gender-based violence. Early on in the pandemic, anti-violence advocates raised concern³ over the likelihood for increases in the rate of gender-based violence similar to that seen in other natural disasters and large-scale crises.⁴ Unfortunately, these early concerns have been well-founded; across the country, sexual assault centres and domestic violence shelters reported changes in demands for services that are alarming.⁵ In its survey on Canadians' perspectives on the pandemic, Statistics Canada also reported that one in 10 women is very or extremely concerned about the possibility of violence in the home.⁶ It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has put immense additional pressure on those organizations and advocates responding to the pre-existing pandemic of gender-based violence.

² EVA Canada organizations include the following: Ending Violence Association of BC; Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services; Sexual Assault Services of Saskatchewan; Ending Violence Across Manitoba; Ontario Network of Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Treatment Centres; Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses; Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres; Association Québécoise Plaidoyer-Victimes; Avalon Sexual Assault Centre; Sexual Violence New Brunswick; Prince Edward Island Rape and Sexual Assault Centre; Newfoundland and Labrador Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre; Yukon Status of Women Council.

³ Rankins, J. (24 March 2020). GTA domestic violence groups brace for 'perfect storm' as abused women stay home amid COVID-19. *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/03/24/gta-domestic-violence-groups-brace-for-perfect-storm-as-abused-women-stay-home-amid-covid-19.html>

⁴ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Cross Societies. Unseen, unheard: Gender-based violence in disasters. https://www.ifrc.org/Global/Documents/Secretariat/201511/1297700_GBV_in_Disasters_EN_LR2.pdf

⁵ Amin, F. (April 8, 2020). Domestic violence calls surge during coronavirus pandemic. <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2020/04/08/domestic-violence-calls-surge-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>;

⁶ Statistics Canada. (8 April 2020). Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 1: Impacts of COVID-19. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200408/dq200408c-eng.htm>

EVA Canada acknowledges the government's willingness to listen to gender-based violence advocates who highlighted the need for extra support. Fifty million dollars in funding provided to domestic violence shelters, sexual assault centres, and emergency shelters on reserve and in the Yukon; \$350 million in the Emergency Community Response Fund; and \$44.7 million over 5 years to build 12 new shelters in First Nations communities on reserve provided essential financial resources to enable organizations to respond to the immediate needs of the crisis.

While we applaud government's efforts to support survivors of gender-based violence and the organizations that serve them, we also know that meeting the ongoing demands these organizations will face over the coming weeks and months will be a complex process requiring additional and ongoing financial support, dialogue, and a concrete commitment to feminist, intersectional government policy.

For these and a number of additional reasons outlined below, EVA Canada offers the following considerations and recommendations to strengthen Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to addressing all forms of gender-based violence.

Considerations

- The pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated enduring systemic inequalities in Canadian society related to gender, ability, race, income, immigration and citizenship status, education, and employment. For women, girls, trans, and non-binary people, one of the many consequences of systemic inequality is the disproportionate rates at which they experience gender-based violence. The deepening of these inequalities during the pandemic has thus also deepened the risk for gender-based violence, particularly for women with disabilities; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women; non-status, immigrant, and refugee women; and women experiencing economic and housing precarity. Funding provided by government to support gender-based violence services was essential to addressing immediate needs created by the pandemic. However, responding to gender-based violence during and after the pandemic requires an ongoing commitment to addressing structural and systemic inequality that is at the root of violence. While the government has made important headway in bolstering financial support for some anti-violence organizations, others continue to be overlooked. For instance, recent funding to support the construction of shelters in First Nations communities failed to designate funding for Inuit shelters despite Inuit women being 14 times more likely than other women to experience violence.⁷ A long-term commitment to ongoing support that reflects a substantive equality and intersectional feminist and human rights approach is imperative to ensure those most deeply impacted by gender-based violence during the pandemic are not left behind.

⁷ Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada. (2 June 2020). Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada urges Prime Minister to reconcile funding of Inuit shelters for women and children. <https://www.pauktuutit.ca/news/pauktuutit-inuit-women-of-canada-urges-prime-minister-to-reconcile-funding-of-inuit-shelters-for-women-and-children/>

- In addition to creating conditions that exacerbate the normal risks for gender-based violence, such as isolation, financial insecurity, and limited access to services, the pandemic has also created opportunities for abusers to utilize new tactics to commit gender-based violence.⁸ Women, girls, trans, and non-binary people already marginalized as a result of disability, immigration or citizenship status, race, poverty, and/or precarious employment are facing heightened risks for gender-based violence in which abusers can use the conditions created by the pandemic for further control and exploitation. For example, whereas women with disabilities were already 2 times more likely than women without a disability to have experienced sexual assault in the last year,⁹ isolation and lack of access to support may create greater risks. Increasing anti-Asian racism and violence during the pandemic has been directed towards women and girls, such as in Vancouver when a man punched a young woman in the face after yelling comments at her in which he linked her ethnic background with the coronavirus.¹⁰ These examples underline that in addition to work already being done to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, anti-violence organizations across Canada will also need to engage in work that reflects and accounts for the new and complex incidents of gender-based violence that are emerging in the context of the pandemic.
- Before the start of the pandemic, anti-violence organizations across Canada were already facing significant challenges in meeting demand for services. For example, many shelters for women and children experiencing violence were already operating at full capacity or with other significant infrastructure and resource challenges.¹¹ Community-based sexual assault centres were also facing significant challenges in meeting demands for services that have continued to grow in the wake of the MeToo movement.¹² At many sexual assault centres across the country, waiting lists to access the specialized, no-cost counselling these centres offer are months and in some cases years long.¹³ In remote and northern regions, the absence of any services for survivors of gender-based violence has been an issue highlighted for many years, most recently in the findings of the Final Report of the National Inquiry into

⁸ WAVAW Rape Crisis Centre. (2 April 2020). Continuum of Sexual Harm During COVID-19. <https://www.wavaw.ca/we-are-here-for-you-during-covid-19/>; Key Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Gender-Based Violence in Canada. (29 April 2020). <https://www.couragetoact.ca/blog/covid19gbv/>; O'Donnell, M., Peterman, A. & Potts, A. (3 April 2020). A Gender-Lens on COVID-19: Pandemics and Violence against Women and Children. Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/gender-lens-covid-19-pandemics-and-violence-against-women-and-children>.

⁹ Statistics Canada. (2018). Violent Victimization of Women with Disabilities, 2014. Juristat. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54910-eng.htm>

¹⁰ Tinwei Lam, Fiona. (7 May 2020). The 'Shadow Pandemic' of Anti-Asian Racism. *The Tyee*. <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2020/05/07/Shadow-Pandemic-Anti-Asian-Racism/>

¹¹ Maki, K. (2019). *More than a bed: A national profile on VAW shelters and transition houses*. Ottawa, ON: Women's Shelters Canada.

¹² Mancini, M. & Roumeliotis, I. (10 Feb. 2020). Sexual assault centres struggle with limited funding as more women come forward to say #MeToo. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sexual-assault-centres-funding-services-1.5450099>

¹³ Soloducha, A. & Pasiuk, E. (3 Dec 2019). Regina sexual assault victims waiting up to 9 months for counselling. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/regina-sexual-assault-centre-counselling-wait-times-1.5380919>; Luck, S. (15 Apr. 2019). Avalon Sexual Assault Centre temporarily not taking on new counselling cases. *CBC News*. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/avalon-sexual-centre-halifax-wait-list-1.5098875>.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.¹⁴ Government funding to shelters and sexual assault centres to assist these organizations in adapting services during the pandemic has been a welcome and important support. This additional financial support, however, is not adequate to address the resource challenges that existed *before* the pandemic, as well as the long-term and steady increase in demand for services that is predicted by experts working in the field as the pandemic restrictions are lifted. As anti-violence organizations continue to provide services over the coming months it will be imperative that additional funding is made available that is adequate to meeting the pre-pandemic needs of these organizations to deliver services, on top of the additional demand that these organizations will face as a result of increasing rates of gender-based violence during the pandemic.

- In addition to the provision of direct services to survivors of gender-based violence, sexual assault centres, domestic violence shelters and transition houses, and other organizations and programs that respond to gender-based violence engage in a variety of professional development, prevention, education and awareness, fundraising, and advocacy activities. In the absence of core funding from government, these programs and activities are an important source of revenue that organizations rely on to ensure sustainability and support programming for survivors. For many of these organizations, the pandemic has put these programs and initiatives at risk with many organizations being forced to delay or even cancel these initiatives.¹⁵ Beyond their financial implications, the cancelation and delay of these initiatives is particularly distressing given the vital role these organizations have to play in providing prevention, education, training, and awareness initiatives about gender-based violence during and following the pandemic when a wide array of service providers may be encountering victims/survivors of gender-based violence. For example, it will be particularly important for sexual violence centres to continue to provide education on consent and sexual assault myths and misconceptions, and to deliver specialized sexual assault response training to social workers, educators, police, and other service providers who may also be interacting with sexual violence survivors during this time.¹⁶ Ensuring adequate core funding to organizations to continue this vital work and to support them in developing alternative ways of delivering training and education that align with COVID-19 restrictions must also be recognized as an essential part of Canada's response to the pandemic and its impact on anti-violence services.
- The organizational landscape of anti-violence services in Canada is complex. In addition to shelters, transition houses, and sexual assault centres, anti-violence services, including

¹⁴ *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls*. (2019). Volume 1a, p. 690. https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Final_Report_Vol_1a-1.pdf

¹⁵ Howard, J. (14 May 2020). COVID-19 pandemic puts sexual assault centres on edge. Canadian Women's Foundation. <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/covid-19-pandemic-puts-sexual-assault-centres-on-edge/>

¹⁶ Ending Violence Association of Canada. (23 March 2020). 10 reasons why additional funding during COVID-19 is important for sexual assault centres. <https://endingviolencecanada.org/10-reasons-why-additional-funding-during-covid-19-is-important-for-sexual-assault-centres/>

domestic violence outreach, sexual assault counselling, and other supports are delivered through a variety of community services agencies and organizations, grassroots networks, provincial and territorial networks, and other equality-seeking organizations for which gender-based violence is one of a variety of areas of service. In government's initial provision of funding to support organizations working with women and children fleeing violence, many of these programs and organizations were ineligible due to the limited criteria through which the funding was delivered. Additional funding provided through the Community Emergency Response Fund has since assisted some of these additional organizations; however, this disjointed and confusing process created additional stress and pressures for organizations during an already stressful time. Challenges in ensuring funding is made available to all anti-violence organizations and services, including formal and informal groups, grassroots networks, and programming serving marginalized women during the pandemic underscores the need for a National Action Plan on Violence Against Women – something advocates have been calling for since 2015 and for which Prime Minister Trudeau made a commitment in his 2019 election platform and Speech from the Throne.¹⁷ A comprehensive and intersectional National Action Plan that identifies and addresses jurisdictional gaps, regional disparities, and reflects a full picture of the scope anti-violence services is integral to ensuring all organizations and services working to support survivors during and in the aftermath of the pandemic are adequately resourced.

- The pandemic has created conditions that make it easier for those who chose to do so to perpetrate gender-based violence; nonetheless, the pandemic itself is not an excuse for gender-based violence. It is imperative that those responsible for violence – including the systems, structures and policies that support violence – are held accountable. Integral to ensuring accountability and oversight is the government's fulfillment of key legislative and policy commitments to strengthening the criminal justice system's response to gender-based violence for which progress has been interrupted as a result of the pandemic. These include but are not limited to Bill C-5, An Act to Amend the *Judges Act* and the *Criminal Code* to ensure judicial education on sexual assault; oversight of the RCMP's review of sexual assault cases; implementation of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' 231 Calls for Justice, including the immediate development of a National Action Plan to address violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people. The heightened risk of violence during this time means that there can be no more delays in fulfilling these commitments. In the same way that the pandemic cannot be an excuse for committing violence so too can it not be an excuse for inaction on fulfilling pressing legislative and policy commitments.

¹⁷ Renewed Call for Canada to Develop and Implement a National Action Plan on Violence Against Women. (July, 2019). <https://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NAP-on-VAW-Election-2019.pdf>; EVA Canada submits letter in support of National Action Plan. (9 March 2020). <https://endingviolencecanada.org/eva-canada-submits-letter-in-support-of-national-action-plan/>

Recommendations

In light of the above context and considerations, the Ending Violence Association of Canada offers the following recommendations to strengthen Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on gender-based violence survivors, advocates, organizations, and services.

- **Ensure the application of an intersectional gender lens to all aspects of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.** In particular, the Ending Violence Association of Canada urges the government to heed the recommendations put forth by feminist and equality-seeking organizations in a letter submitted to the Minister of Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development. These recommendations include:
 - Immediate gaps in the emergency funding for the women's and gender equality sector, in particular those organizations not already receiving funding through the initial injection of \$200M into homelessness and GBV response, with a focus on the different needs, such as Indigenous women, women with disabilities and 2SLGBTQ+.
 - Ensuring that all government COVID-19 response policies are designed through robust Gender-Based Analysis+ and gender budgeting procedures, considering the needs of those most marginalized by intersecting inequalities.
 - Processes and funding to engage women's rights, women's services and gender equality organizations in an ongoing role in development of intersectional GBA-informed responses both during and post-pandemic.
 - Financial stabilization of the women's sector that recognizes the existing unique disadvantages that this sector faces, compared to other charities and non-profits.¹⁸
- **Support relationship-building between the Department of Women and Gender Equality and other relevant government departments and national, provincial, and territorial entities and networks involved in gender-based violence response that can facilitate ongoing consultation and collaboration in developing solutions.** In particular, ensure that provincial and territorial bodies engaged in sexual violence services and response are included in planning responses to the crisis. These provincial and territorial bodies and organizations work closely with service providers, and are equipped to provide information and perspective to government that will be important to identifying effective solutions.
- **Ensure transparency and clarity in communication related to funding decisions, and application processes for gender-based violence-related funding.** The complexity of anti-violence services across Canada can make it difficult to develop inclusive criteria necessary to ensure all forms of services are considered in funding decisions. Providing clear and transparent information about how funding criteria is developed, as well as information about how funding is distributed, will allow for anti-violence organizations to work collaboratively

¹⁸ Advocating for a Strong Gender Lens on the COVID-19 Pandemic. (23 April 2020). <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/gender-lens-on-covid-19/>

with government to identify systemic gaps in funding opportunities or barriers to certain organizations.

- **Extend equitable and adequate funding to sexual assault centres, services, and other organizations working to provide sexual violence support.** Funding of \$3 million provided to sexual assault centres made a vital contribution to the work of these organizations. Recognizing that the \$20.54 million to shelters and transitions houses is essential to support the residential and other services they provide, as well as the comparatively greater number of shelters and transition houses to sexual assault centres across Canada, the disparity of funding provided to support sexual violence services was substantial. We suggest that government embrace a more fulsome understanding of sexual violence services that recognizes the full spectrum of impacts felt by these organizations as a result of the pandemic, and that funding is available to match these needs.¹⁹
- **Initiate consultations with anti-violence organizations, including sexual assault organizations, services and networks, to proactively identify emerging areas of concern as organizations and services adjust to new realities and conditions.** Sexual violence and domestic violence organizations, as well as other organizations working to support vulnerable populations, are bracing for a sharp increase in demand for services as the pandemic restrictions are lifted. Beyond the added pressure this will place on organizations in providing counselling and other forms of direct services to survivors, organizations will also be required to adapt professional development programming, education and training, fundraising, and project-based activities. A pro-active plan developed in consultation with organizations and frontline workers can decrease uncertainty and added pressure while ensuring better short and long-term solutions that focus on systemic rather than reactionary change.
- **Take immediate action necessary to fulfill previously made legislative and policy commitments related to strengthening systemic response to gender-based violence.** In particular, the Ending Violence Association of Canada urges the government to fulfill its commitments to:
 - Strengthening the criminal justice system's response to sexual violence by supporting the passage of Bill C-5, An Act to Amend the Judges' Act and the Criminal Code, including the recommendations put forth by EVA Canada, the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL), the Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime (OFOVC), and the DisAbled Women's Network of Canada (DAWN) to further strengthen this legislation;²⁰

¹⁹ Ending Violence Association of Canada. (23 March 2020). 10 reasons why additional funding during COVID-19 is important for sexual assault centres. <https://endingviolencecanada.org/10-reasons-why-additional-funding-during-covid-19-is-important-for-sexual-assault-centres/>

²⁰ Ending Violence Association of Canada. (13 April 2020). Brief on Bill C-5, An Act to amend the *Judges Act* and the *Criminal Code*. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/431/JUST/Brief/BR10725256/br->

- Acting on the joint statement submitted to the government on behalf of equality-seeking organizations for the timely development of a National Action Plan to address Violence Against Women and Girls²¹
- Following through on its legal obligation to respond to the findings of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and its 231 Calls for Justice, including the immediate development of a National Action Plan to address violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people.

Conclusion

EVA Canada continues to hear regularly about the concerns and challenges survivors of gender-based violence are facing during the pandemic. Ensuring that organizations and services with the expertise to support survivors have the resources necessary to do their work is an important first step. For a meaningful and lasting response to the pandemic and its impact on gender-based violence survivors, advocates, and organizations, government must also initiate and support efforts to implement systemic changes that can address long-standing structural inequality that not only creates additional risk for violence for women, girls, trans, and non-binary people within current systems but also makes it more difficult for those most marginalized within these systems to access support.

[external/EndingViolenceAssociationOfCanada-e.pdf](#); LEAF (Women's Legal Education and Action Fund). (23 March 2020). *Bill C-5: An Act to amend the Judges Act and the Criminal Code*. <https://www.leaf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-03-23-FINAL-LEAF-Written-Submissions-re-Bill-C-5-.pdf>; NAWL (National Association of Women and the Law). (13 April 2020). Brief on Bill C-5: An Act to amend the Judges Act and the Criminal Code. <https://www.leaf.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-03-23-FINAL-LEAF-Written-Submissions-re-Bill-C-5-.pdf>; OFOVC (Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime). (27 March 2020). *Submission to the House of Commons' Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights: Study on Bill C-5, An Act to amend the Judges Act and the Criminal Code*. <https://www.victimfirst.gc.ca/vv/BC5-BC5/index.html>; DAWN (DisAbled Women's Network of Canada). (12 March 2020). Resources and Recommendations. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/431/JUST/Brief/BR10712963/br-external/DisAbledWomensNetworkOfCanada-e.pdf>.

²¹ Renewed Call for Canada to Develop and Implement a National Action Plan on Violence Against Women. (July, 2019). <https://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NAP-on-VAW-Election-2019.pdf>; EVA Canada submits letter in support of National Action Plan. (9 March 2020). <https://endingviolencecanada.org/eva-canada-submits-letter-in-support-of-national-action-plan/>