



ACWS Position Statement

Adopted by the ACWS Board at their meeting on February the 8th, 2019.

Naming of women killed by their intimate partner

It is the position of the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters that violence against women is a complex social issue that needs to have greater public attention and discussion. The causes of femicide, the factors leading up to it and the naming of those killed contribute to public awareness and education of the public and helps to remove the stigma around domestic violence. Domestic violence is not a private family matter rather it is a widespread social issue, also described by the World Health Organization as a major public health issue. Failing to identify victims contributes to an ongoing silencing of the issue at the individual, community and societal levels.

The naming of victims should be undertaken for the following reasons:

- It provides an opportunity for the community to convey their respect and to comfort surviving family members.
- The public should know who among us is being killed and who has killed them.
- Publication of victims' names can help investigations or provide crucial information about a case, even if seemingly solved; supporting stakeholder accountability.
- Information about murders helps communities and society better understand social problems
- Naming of a victim makes them and the crime more real for communities and increases attention on the issue.¹

"The Vancouver Police Department releases the names of homicide victims for a number of reasons,"
"We never want to live in a society where someone can be murdered in secret."
<https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/2018/05/14/names-released-homicide-investigations>

Background

When a woman is murdered by her intimate partner it is a matter of great private pain for family, friends and community members. It is also a matter of significant social and public concern because it represents an aspect of society in which women are targeted for violence and abuse *because* they are women. The immediate stress factors which may result in abuse (e.g. feeling a loss of control; abuse of addictive substances; changes to

¹ As identified at the November, 2018 meeting of Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative with Vulnerable Populations.

financial status) are compounded by a set of complex social factors which require a multitude of interventions to resolve. Among these interventions is a shift in public awareness and discourse.

Alberta has one of the highest rates of domestic violence and domestic violence homicides in the country. Individual stories place faces and context around these sorry statistics. By placing a human face to the victim of a violent crime we can help the public at large to grapple with the reality of what is otherwise an incomprehensible event.

[Current approaches by law enforcement agencies in Alberta](#)

In Alberta, the Edmonton Police Service has taken the position that victims should not be named, while Calgary currently names victims. The RCMP is taking a similar approach to that of the Edmonton Police Service. The Alberta Domestic Violence Death Review Committee also does not name the victim or perpetrator nor are names available through the Medical Examiner.

Reasons cited most often are that it “does not serve an investigative purpose” and the force has “a duty to protect the privacy rights of the victims and their families.” However, the refusal to publish names may not lead to the protection or guarantee of privacy. Information is available through other sources, including details of property ownership, protection orders and previous court orders. In the cases of homicides, the perpetrator, who is a member of the family, will be publicly charged, with a public court case. In all these contexts privacy protection becomes a moot point.

The Alberta Association of Chiefs of Police issued a decision framework on naming homicide victims in August, 2017. The decision framework suggests that names be released on a case by case basis, subject to relevant considerations such as the “public good” but also makes specific reference to the nature of the homicide that that there may be a greater relevance to public safety relating to stranger homicide as opposed to a homicide between known associates.

Across the country practices vary widely - there is no national standard and policies are subject to change. The Regina police began the process of not publishing names, however this policy was reconsidered and changed due to public outcry.

[The Impact on Family, Friends and the Wider Community](#)

It is the ACWS position that a blanket policy of refusing to name women who are homicide victims of domestic violence contributes to the public shaming of these women and their loved ones - as well as those women currently surviving in these relationships. It says to the woman, and her family, that she is not worthy of community recognition.

As a friend of a recent homicide victim of domestic violence commented: ‘hearing the news reports and having her name out there gave solace to the family.’ Indeed, many family members and friends of domestic violence homicides passionately advocate for system change in the name of their loved one. The refusal to name a domestic violence victim is a refusal to acknowledge her individuality and value as well as the failure of society to protect her. Many

families have made a point of using the victim's name setting up memorial walks, establishing women's shelters and services in their name, and making donations to women's shelters.

The impact of femicide upon neighbours, families and particularly children cannot be ignored. ACWS continues to call for specialised ongoing support for children whose mothers have been murdered as well as their caregivers. Whether the names are released or not, children run the risk of being bullied and stigmatized at school as well as the psychological impact of carrying this knowledge over their lifetime. Appropriate treatment and support, a better understanding around the effect decisions about the contact with their surviving father have upon children and the best placement for these children need to have greater attention, research and public support.

Schools, neighbours, workplaces, and service providers are all impacted by domestic violence homicides and ought to be informed. This means as well that there needs to be an appropriate trauma informed approach for family members and friends of the woman who was killed and support for them in their connections with the media and others.

Impact of the policy on indigenous communities

Indigenous women and girls are over-represented in femicide cases and over-represented in the women's shelter population as a whole. Silence around this issue perpetuates and maintains violence against Indigenous women and girls because it limits the possibility for meaningful, informed public debate on how to shape appropriate social, governmental and criminal justice responses. Currently our government services are failing to provide an adequate response to the needs of many Indigenous people. One clear piece of evidence for this is the difference in solve rates in the cases of murdered Indigenous women as opposed to solve rates in the cases of murdered settler women.²

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) worked painstakingly to compile a list and provide names and faces to women who were missing and murdered. An approach that now seeks to hide the names of all femicide victims needs to be questioned. Public disclosure means more public accountability.

A chance to shape discourse and end violence and abuse

Naming of victims presents a possibility to commemorate the life and love of a human being. It also helps facilitate the prevention of further domestic violence homicides. The ACWS Leading Change Call to Action invites communities across the province to engage in steps – small and powerful – which can support the ending of violence against women, in particular through a focus on engaging men and boys. The public needs the opportunity to have a conversation about the homicide and to learn more about the reasons underlying the death as part of an overall domestic violence response and prevention strategy.

² Cf. #CallitFemicide: understanding gender-related killings of women and girls in Canada in 2018: "Just over three quarters of homicides involving an Aboriginal victim were solved compared to 84% for non-Aboriginal female victims., p53. Available at <https://femicideincanada.ca/callitfemicide.pdf>

'We must not only respond to the victims and perpetrators of interpersonal violence but also work to prevent the violence in the first place. Prevention efforts take place before the problem starts and help address the underlying causes of physical and sexual violence in order to reduce rates of violence and ultimately to eliminate it all together.' *ACWS Leading Change Inspired Communities Model*³

Every year all levels of government participate in annual commemorations reflecting on those who died in service to Canada during various historical wars. During these commemorations great significance is given to the stories of individual soldiers who gave their lives under situations of extreme violence. The telling of these stories is recognised as a public norm of some importance because we aspire to the prevention of such wars under rubric of 'Never Again.' And, yet, though the numbers of women killed each year is greater than the number of Canadian troops killed in Afghanistan⁴ we still debate the appropriateness of naming victims. ACWS believes that this is rooted in a flawed understanding of domestic violence as a private matter and because our society still places less value on the life of a woman when compared to the life of a man.⁵

In addition, the decision to refuse to publish a victim's name may also be rooted in an attitude of paternalism in which an [often male] authority figure decides how the victim will [or will not] be remembered.

[Media reporting on domestic violence homicides](#)

The media plays a hugely significant role in shaping and reflecting public understanding on domestic violence and its causes. In the early stages following a domestic violence assault, homicide or murder suicide, the police provide information to the public through the media, setting the news agenda for how the crime is understood and communicating their particular understanding of community standards.

Refusal to name a victim also creates an information vacuum at the very time when the media – and the public - may require it most.

³ P4, available at <https://acws.ca/collaborate-document/2563/view>

⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/firsthand/blog/shelly-saywell-the-war-at-home>

⁵ Canadians do gather each year to mark the Montreal Massacre and during these events the victims are named.

A series of old-fashioned frames⁶ on domestic violence may often and easily fill this vacuum⁷ [and of course may be employed irrespective of the vacuum]:

- “A private matter.” [Man’s home is his castle frame: evokes the notion that the public have no right to know and that the public are safe from similar actions.]
- “He loved too much.” [Crime of passion frame: evokes sympathy with the perpetrator and shifts blame to the victim.]
- “He was provoked.” Or “He lost control.” [Blame the victim frame: shifts responsibility from the perpetrator’s actions.]
- “He was a great neighbour/coach/businessman.” [Street Angel/House Devil frame: evokes the notion that the public are safe from similar perpetrators and evokes sympathy with the perpetrator.]

However, research indicates that a man who is violent and abusive at home is:

- (a) Engaging in behaviour which has social licence and social consequences.
- (b) Engaged in controlling (not loving) behaviour.
- (c) Responsible for his actions as the perpetrator of a crime, irrespective of victim behaviour.
- (d) May pose an immediate threat to others⁸ and/or may pose an ongoing threat of violence and abuse in other contexts, including socially or in a workplace.

ACWS believes that where government institutions fail to engage in communications which seek to shift public understanding the media has a clear role to step in holding these institutions to account and also seeking to engage in discourse shifting reporting.⁹

The publication of information by government bodies (including law enforcement) as well as by the media must provide for certain basic tenants:

1. Recognise the social context & the role of gender inequality

A woman’s murder must be contextualized within the social context of violence against women, by experts in the field. The story is about her death and who she was—but the situation is an ongoing social problem. ACWS also calls upon the police and the media to ensure that the way details are shared about their lives does not imply they were somehow culpable.

⁶ The Ontario Association of Interval & Transition Houses has conducted some research on negative frames on domestic violence available here: <https://www.oaith.ca/oaith-work/current-initiatives.html>

⁷ See some sample headlines reflecting these frames here <https://www.the-pool.com/news-views/latest-news/2018/41/Dignity-for-Dead-Women-IPSO-asks-for-domestic-violence-reporting-meeting>

⁸ In 1995 Sheila Salter was abducted then murdered after the perpetrator, Peter-John Brighteyes, had attempted to sexually assault a former girlfriend.

⁹ In the UK Level Up is campaigning for a national set of editorial standards for reporting on domestic violence, see more here <https://www.welevelup.org/press/>

Particular expressions of gender inequality consistently predict higher rates of violence against women, i.e.,

- Condoning of violence against women.
- Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life.
- Rigid gender roles and stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity.
- Male peer relations that emphasize aggression and disrespect towards women.

2. Provide access to resources for others facing domestic abuse

A wealth of resources and supports are available for women facing domestic abuse. Published information should provide access to information about how to find these resources, eg. The ACWS shelter helpline or Find a Shelter page online.

3. Include the voices of experts and community-based advocates

Staff in women's shelters support women facing abuse every day. They are experts in supporting women to develop safety plans and protocols. Representatives from shelters provide expert, authoritative voices in how to approach the various problems at play.

4. Be sensitive to the power of language

The language used, and the information provided, by the police, has a direct impact on media coverage. The ability of the media to cover the story, including through questioning of police information, underpins how domestic violence is understood in the broader community. Both the police and the media play an important role in educating the public about violence against women and the factors contributing to it.

In Australia, changing the language about domestic violence is a pillar of a shared national framework for the primary prevention of violence.¹⁰ *Change the story* brings together international research and nationwide experience on what drives violence against women and their children and what works to prevent it. It establishes a shared understanding of the evidence and principles of effective prevention and presents a way forward for a coordinated national approach.

ACWS will be developing media guidelines which can provide support to government, shelters and advocates as well as family members during a very difficult time.

¹⁰ <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/what-we-do/national-primary-prevention-framework>