



# **ACWS Response to the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence**

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12-08-2021

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## Background

Under international law to address violence against women, states are required to exercise due diligence to prevent acts of violence against women; to investigate such acts and prosecute and punish perpetrators—and to provide redress and relief to victims<sup>1</sup>. The requirement to adopt and implement national action plans to address violence against women is set out in international and regional human rights instruments and policy documents.

As a founding member of the Global Network of Women's Shelter, ACWS recognizes the importance of the international instruments for advancing women's rights around the world, and what we desire for ourselves we also wish for others. As reflected in Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy<sup>2</sup>, Canada's human rights obligations are not just for Canadian women.

The policy obligates Canada to speak out against oppression of women around the world, where a majority of women live in poverty, and many are trafficked into forced labour and sex slavery, are refused access to education and political participation, and experience state-sanctioned violence or abuse as, for example, is currently happening in Afghanistan where women are beaten for demanding equal rights<sup>3</sup>.

Closer to home, immigrant and refugee women who come from around the world face significant challenges upon seeking asylum in Canada, beyond those experienced by all newcomers such as poverty, discrimination, and literacy. Many women arrive here without marketable skills, are responsible for children, are often dependent on their spouse, and are more vulnerable to domestic violence and child abduction threats.<sup>4</sup>

The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters (ACWS) has long recognized the need for a national action on gender-based violence based on international conventions and has supported efforts through its membership with Women's Shelters Canada to advance this objective. Canada needs a National Action Plan (NAP) on violence against women (VAW) to ensure that women in all areas of the country and across the world have access to comparable levels of services and protection. A NAP would also build a shared understanding of the root causes of VAW as well as coordinated and effective efforts across the federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal levels.

This document is ACWS' response to the launch of the National Action Plan by the Government of Canada in June 2021. YWCA Canada's Discussion Guide, developed on behalf of Women's Shelters Canada, describes the Plan as support to the Government of Canada's overall efforts to promote and advance gender equality in Canada, ensuring that a stable national VAW/GBV<sup>5</sup> sector is in place and is guided by and builds on the expertise and knowledge accumulated by women serving organizations. Canadian Women's Shelter Network wants to make sure that national standards, transparency, and potentially some mechanisms are in place for the federal government to directly support the women's sector.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unwomen.org/en>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues\\_developpement-enjeux\\_developpement/priorities-priorites/fiap-paif.aspx?lang=eng](https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/fiap-paif.aspx?lang=eng)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.oxfam.org/en/what-we-do/issues/gender-justice-and-womens-rights>; <https://www.hrw.org/topic/womens-rights#>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58491747>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/P4W\\_BN\\_ImmigrantWomen.pdf](https://www.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/P4W_BN_ImmigrantWomen.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> YWCA Canada (February 2021). Discussion Guide. Informing the National Action to End Gender-Based Violence – Community Engagement Initiative.

## The Issue of Violence Against Women

- Gender-based violence in Canada doesn't stop. In fact, it's escalating. The global pandemic has only exacerbated the situation for those who experience inequality.
- Disappearances and murders of Indigenous women and girls don't stop.
- **6.3 million women** and girls in Canada will experience sexual violence or intimate partner violence in their lifetimes, according to World Health Organization estimates.
- **Every 2.5 days.** That's how often a woman or girl is killed in Canada.
- **Every hour of every day,** a woman in Alberta will undergo some form of interpersonal violence from an ex-partner or ex-spouse<sup>6</sup>.

## Why Does Canada Need a National Action Plan?

- Women deserve the same level of service and the same supports no matter where they live in Canada. And domestic violence incidents often follow women no matter where they live or relocate.
- Service access should not depend on the postal code one lives in. Canada needs a NAP on VAW to ensure that women in all areas of the country have access to comparable levels of services and protection. A NAP would ensure a shared understanding of the root causes of VAW as well as coordinated and effective efforts across the federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal levels.

## Why Does the Province of Alberta Need to be an Active Player in a National Action Plan?

Domestic Violence is a serious and urgent problem in Alberta, a province that typically is one of the three provinces with the highest rates in many of the statistics: number of murder suicides, number of police reported incidents, and number of children in care due to exposure to domestic violence<sup>7</sup>.

The costs of this violence in the province are substantive, including financial costs but also the staggering personal costs of pain and suffering inflicted on survivors, their children and families as well as the additional costs of misogyny and racism experienced by the broader community. A recent illustration of these costs is the trial and retrials of Bradley Barton for the murder of Cindy Gladue—which served as a stark reminder of the work that still needs to be done. The initial trial dehumanized Ms. Gladue and the Supreme Court strongly condemned the use of racist and sexist stereotypes about Indigenous women by those involved in the case.

The backdrop to the serious problem of VAW/GBV in Alberta along with its staggering costs is the boom/bust economy, the impact of fly in fly out jobs on families not only in Alberta but across Canada, the connection between the influx of transient workers and violence against Indigenous women,<sup>8</sup> and the corresponding migration patterns in the province. All this has particular impact on women (as was especially evident during the pandemic) but also adds stressors on families, further exacerbating the provincial violence rates. Ultimately,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>; Preventing Domestic Violence in Alberta: A Cost Savings Perspective, Wells, Lana; Boodt, Casey; Emery, Herb 2012

<sup>7</sup> Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics; <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00001-eng.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> James Anaya, former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, testimony to the MMIWI

economic recovery from the pandemic will depend, to the large extent, on women's ability to safely participate in the workplace, without being subjected to violence at home or in the community.

Finally, political priorities in Alberta and elsewhere often dictate how much attention is paid to a particular issue. Just as resources may increase when VAW/GBV issues are incorporated into the provincial government's agenda, these contributions can be drastically reduced with a new government or when priorities change, critically impeding community capacity for long-term planning and sustainable and effective response. There has also been a tendency across Canada for provincial governments to showcase one particular action as their commitment to addressing domestic violence, when all the literature tells us that strong community collaborative responses, grounded in informed practice and evaluation are what is truly needed.

While its environment contributes to the problem of VAW/GBV in the province, Alberta is particularly well positioned to become an important contributor and a leader in addressing the issue of VAW/GBV nationwide. The Alberta Council of Women's Shelters network is grounded in the expertise of 40 members located in every area of the province. The organization has led ground breaking work such as: conceiving and hosting the First World Conference of Women's Shelters; leading the initiative to form both global and Canadian networks of women's shelters; developing the basis for UN Women's module on shelters for their virtual knowledge centre; action-based research on standardized assessment tools; a long standing partnership with Johns Hopkins University on researching and implementing the danger assessment; and our Safety From Domestic Violence initiative. Other sectors in the province (e.g., school boards, justice sector, mental health, children's services, municipal government) and communities (Band councils) have been actively working to attend to the issue and should also be involved in guiding the development and the implementation of the action plan nationally and at the provincial and local/regional levels.

## ACWS Position

ACWS supports the recommendations called for in [“A Report to Guide the Implementation of a National Action Plan on Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence”](#) (NAP) put forth by Women’s Shelters Canada in April 2021.

ACWS calls for Government of Canada and the Alberta Government to make responses to escalating gender-based violence in Canada a central consideration in the 2022-23 budget and onward. ACWS believes that Canada needs a NAP on VAW/GBV to ensure that women in all areas of the country—including rural and on-reserve communities—have access to comparable levels of services and protection. ACWS proposes the following critical guidelines for implementation of the plan:

### Implemented Under Intersectional Feminist Leadership

- ACWS advocates for a NAP that is guided by intersectional feminist expertise. Women’s shelters are centers of expertise and should be part of the conversation. Any new commitments and targets must be established and co-led with community-based experts and advocates.

### Delivered Under an Oversight of a Provincial Expert Advisory and Monitoring Body

- This body would consist of provincial VAW/GBV organizations, academics, and other experts who would help develop, implement, and monitor the plan in close communication with their national counterparts.

### Provides Long-Term Operational Funding

- Robust federal and provincial funding is essential to support the 10-year National Action Plan, earmarking dollars for the ongoing, long-term, multiyear operational funding (rather than for consultation or small projects) to women-serving agencies and equity-seeking organizations. The Provincial Body proposed above would have an important role to play in advising on funding allocations.

### Implemented Alongside MMIWG NAP

- ACWS supports calls for a parallel National Action Plan on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). There is an urgent need to do so!

### Allocated in a Transparent and Inclusive Manner

- Any funding packages delivered through the provinces must be transparent, building upon the knowledge of women’s shelters, survivor-serving organizations, and marginalized communities and focused on client needs.
- The federal government and the Government of Alberta must also be transparent in the allocation of these funds through public disclosure and the setting of benchmarks and standards.

## Is Responsive to the Pandemic Impacts

Alberta has been one of the provinces where COVID-19 has had the most devastating impact upon the health and well-being of its residents, further magnified by some of the highest domestic violence rates. The impact of the decisions made by the provincial government during the pandemic will be felt for many years to come, in terms of urgent need for physical and mental health supports, responses to addictions that have skyrocketed during the pandemic, managing high staff turnover and clogged legal systems and a recognition of the emotional and financial burden carried by both the women who have experienced domestic or sexual violence during the pandemic, as well as those who have valiantly tried to support them.

- ACWS calls for \$250 million to be earmarked for ongoing emergency COVID-19 related GBV response while the NAP gets started.
- ACWS supports strategies that address the needs of the groups particularly impacted by the pandemic (e.g., racialized women, newcomer women, Indigenous women, 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, and youth).

## Summary of ACWS Recommendations

In February of 2021, YWCA of Canada released a Discussion Guide to support locally based community engagement initiatives to respond to the NAP. Organizations across the country and the communities they represent, serve, and work alongside were asked to provide input into this action plan. In March 2021, ACWS surveyed its members and held 3 consultation sessions with 43 organizations, following NAP guidelines, engagement guiding principles<sup>9</sup>, and using an intersectional lens<sup>10</sup> to support the consultation. The discussion questions were organized across five main pillars provided by YWCA of Canada:

1. Support for survivors and their families
2. Prevention
3. Promotion of responsive legal and justice systems
4. Support for Indigenous-led approaches and informed responses
5. Social infrastructure and enabling environment

The summary that follows is built upon the feedback and recommendations from the most recent consultations as well as key resources, documents and consultations developed and/or collected by ACWS over the years (Attachment A). As noted above, additional and significant human and financial resources will be needed to support these measures.

**Canada's National Action Plan needs to include:**

### Support for Survivors and Their Families

- Universal, coordinated, adequately funded, clear, and effective services and systems for survivors of VAW/GBV and their families that respect and respond to intersectionality based on multiple forms of discrimination and differential access to protection by the state. This framework should build on the international obligations and must have equitable access across the country for all forms of gender based violence;
- Universal coverage of response mechanisms for survivors with a continuum of residential and community-based services as well as provisions for universality of access across regions and in rural and remote communities—including the reinstatement of the provincial victims' fund—rather than focusing on expensive technologies such as ankle bracelets that ultimately do not keep women safe;
- Standards for practice that require specialist and long-term services focused on survivor-centered, intersectional approaches, empowerment, trauma-informed care, integrated health and mental wellness services, safety, system advocacy, accountability, and compassion;
- Focus on client-based, rather than system-based services, with efforts to substantially reduce system navigation barriers through an inclusive approach;
- Provision of culturally, age appropriate and sensitive essential services that respond to the individual circumstances and life experiences of women and girls, taking into account their age, identity, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity and language preferences;
- Resources to support expansion of gendered VAW/GBV services to build gender inclusivity and create safe spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

<sup>9</sup> Uphold integrity and respect; emphases on prevention; embrace diversity; respect survivors; be evidence-based; value partnerships.

<sup>10</sup> To speak to particular barriers facing diverse groups of people such as: Indigenous women and girls; Black and racialized women and girls; gender diverse and 2SLGBTQIA+ people; women and girls living in northern, rural, and remote communities; women and girls living with disabilities; non-status and temporary status, immigrant and refugee women and girls; children and youth; and senior women.



## Prevention

- Prevention efforts that, in addition to primary prevention, build on secondary and tertiary prevention as well as intervention efforts that already exist and are working in the community; and as already outlined in WHO's RESPECT Framework;
- Children's programming, particularly programming for pre-school children, that is trauma-informed, developmentally and gender appropriate and that is based on knowledge of childhood attachment and behavioral disorders, to help children negotiate the traumatic impact of their domestic violence experience, and prevent their exposure to domestic violence in adulthood;
- Formal guiding principles that set a foundation for responsive and culturally competent health system practices; including educating health professionals regarding health issues for VAW/GBV survivors and their children and developing multi-disciplinary VAW/GBV response teams in health settings;
- Recognizing that men have a key role in preventing and addressing VAW/GBV—with emphasis on involvement of men and boys as advocates against VAW/GBV and agents of change in their communities—and using initiatives in schools, workplaces or on sports teams, following strategies and programs already in place, such as the ACWS Leading Change framework;
- Development of healthy relationships skills among Canadian youth: introducing evidence-based anti-bullying and healthy relationships programming in all schools and post-secondary educational institutions;
- Funding for a National Media Watchdog following an Australian example to change portrayal of women in the media, holding media and all levels of government to account, incentivizing their positive engagement and ensuring that media and government press releases avoid gender stereotyping;
- Support for community-based public awareness initiatives, including social media and social marketing and communication campaigns, expanding platforms and modes of prevention education programs to unique audiences—aimed at shifting public perceptions, addressing myths associated with VAW/GBV, and addressing gendered perspectives, and gender inclusivity. Leger survey commissioned by ACWS on men's attitudes can serve as a benchmark to measure impact of such initiatives.

## Promotion of Responsive Legal and Justice Systems

- A review of all justice mechanisms, including policing, prosecution, and offender management practices to ensure that new interventions do not repeat experiences that drive the most marginalized women away from seeking assistance and protection from the state;
- Implementing the recommendations of the Alberta Family Violence Death Review Committee (e.g., Death Review Committee Cases 8 and 9) for the criminal justice system, health, and child welfare for increased communication, collaboration and information sharing within the legal system and with its stakeholders; ensuring the appropriate assessment and management of risk by violent repeat offenders of family/domestic violence, particularly in cases where the perpetrator has an extensive and violent criminal record history, or in cases where there are other factors present that are indicative of a heightened risk of harm; applying, as an example, Alberta's Clare's Law to notify women of partner's criminal history who suspect their partner may be violent;
- Promotion of responsive and accessible legal services and advice grounded in understanding of VAW/GBV, root causes, and barriers experienced by the marginalized and vulnerable families, such as:



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Enhanced programs for duty counsel in the family and protection order context
  - Remote access providing legal advice to women who are from vulnerable populations
  - Legal advice readily available for women in shelter.
  - Outreach to Indigenous communities
- Processes that strengthen and empower VAW/GBV service providers to advocate on behalf of the survivors in court and on multidisciplinary teams; using ACWS examples of Integrated Case Assessment Teams (ICATs) implementation in ACWS Blueprint project;
- Mandatory, evidence-informed and standardized training on VAW/GBV for the representatives of the justice system—integrated with and acted upon by existing structures (e.g., presented to the Court of Queen’s Bench, at national conferences, in law school, accredited, and as part of continued competences)—and informed by feminist principles, root causes of violence, gender inclusivity and impact of trauma;
- Empowering justice responses that recognize patterns of coercive controlling behavior and train legal actors to take preventative action; rather than limiting system responses to single, overtly criminal incidents;
- Balancing procedural fairness while ensuring that victims of violence are not exposed to cross examination by a self-represented abuser;
- Increased access to expert witnesses who are well trained in VAW/GBV context and who can testify on the dynamics of abuse in court;
- Police response that avoids forced engagement of survivors with police, and when police do become involved, does not retraumatize women, ensures that survivors’ perspectives are taken into account and includes appropriate and consistent issuance of protection orders;
- Offender treatment programs that are evidence-based, justice-focused (rather than mental health focused) and that prioritize the safety and security of survivors and children, while effectively holding perpetrators accountable and ensuring fairness in justice responses;
- Implementation of threat assessment, screening, and risk management tools, processes to keep survivors and children safe by including survivor’s perception of risk, children’s potential exposure to violence and practitioners’ expert judgement; building on examples such as the Danger Assessment used by Alberta women’s shelters that assesses a woman’s risk of femicide.
- Alignment of provincial family law legislation with the 2021 amendments to the federal Divorce Act<sup>11</sup>, broadening the definition of family violence to include emotional and psychological abuse and coercive and controlling behaviour as well as reference to children’s direct or indirect exposure to family violence; providing a greater emphasis on the best interest of the child and explicitly including family violence as a factor relevant to those best interests;
- On-going review of legislation (criminal and civil) to ensure it reflects the latest research, is consistent across the country, and that keeps survivors and children safe and offenders accountable;
- Alberta has recently appointed a Chief Firearms Officer.<sup>12</sup> The role of the office includes determining licensing eligibility, compliance with legislation, overseeing the administration of firearms safety courses and other duties that previously fell to the federal government. However, there are no indicators or duties for the office to address gun safety from the perspective of domestic violence. Given that firearms are a frequent element of domestic violence in Canada and that women and

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<sup>11</sup> [Family Violence and Family Law in Alberta: The Need for Legislative Reform and Expansive Statutory Interpretation | \(ablawg.ca\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=7974026AB7B88-F989-567F-07198E67A4C7B4EF>

children suffer disproportionately from a lack of control on firearms<sup>13</sup> and that the number of gun offences is also rising in Alberta as well as across the country<sup>14</sup> it is imperative that the National Action Plan and provincial roles include a recommendation for addressing gun violence as an element of domestic violence.

## Support for Indigenous Led Approaches and Informed Responses

- Parallel National Action Plan on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG);
- Recognition that we need to look at intergenerational trauma through an Indigenous lens, focusing on healing and building relationships; similar to the ACWS Walking the Path Together project focusing on engaging with families of young children;
- Systemic examination of root causes and consequences of violence using Indigenous feminist analysis and human rights based approach; led by Indigenous women; and recognizing colonization and historical trauma. This reconciliation and accounting for the history of colonialism and its results is a necessary first step toward developing services that better support Indigenous women, children, and families;
- Strategies addressing the needs of Indigenous women living in rural and remote locations including improving critical lack of safe, supportive, and transitional housing, accommodating women in close proximity to where they live;
- Participatory decision-making processes involving Indigenous women, service providers as well as survivors, their families and communities incorporated at every level of policy and programming from legislative and policy development, the setting of priorities to everyday governance and service delivery;
- Creating safe spaces within service delivery sector for recruitment, training, and retention of Indigenous service providers and organizational leaders and volunteers;
- Role clarity and authority for workers involved in Child and Family Services cases both on and off reserves and across jurisdictions;
- Changing the Administrative Reform Agreement between Alberta and Canada, such that the funds derived from the Agreement are used to provide enhanced services to First Nations women and child welfare services to First Nations children who come to provincially funded shelters rather than flow to general revenues;
- Addressing underfunding of Indigenous organizations and especially of on-reserve shelters ensuring funding formulas are comparable to provincially funded shelters;
- Addressing the lack of basic services in Indigenous communities; providing the dollars necessary to cover much needed benefits for abused women, such as the Escaping Violence Benefit and social housing.

## Social Infrastructure and Enabling Environment

- Clear guidelines for establishing mutually empowered and accountable multi-disciplinary collaborative and community-based response models—with effective information sharing agreements—and supporting family-centered service delivery; consulting with representatives of the marginalized communities and including representatives of justice, health, and children's serving sectors. These collaborative initiatives should build on existing community efforts, focusing on priority community needs and relying on leadership and expertise of service providers who are held accountable for their participation;

<sup>13</sup> <http://guncontrol.ca/issues-and-facts/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00010-eng.htm>



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Funding models that support effective, sustainable and accountable community efforts, encouraging joint responsibility and accountability from partners.
- Strengthened social policies that affect women's vulnerability to violence, addressing well-known gaps in social safety nets and housing. Without addressing these needs, women cannot obtain employment, safe homes, bank accounts, or fulfill any other aspects of an independent self-sustained life; they cannot begin to establish themselves and weave the safety netting that will sustain them in the future;
- Increased supply and accessibility to safe, secure, affordable, non-discriminatory, culturally sensitive housing in sufficient quantity and locations (note in particular access to housing subsidies for those relocating from small, remote and rural communities and a review of National Occupancy Guidelines and how they are implemented by provinces);
- Redraft Housing First guidelines, standards, and assessment tools relative to the experience of VAW/GBV survivors; ensuring that VAW/GBV issues are prioritized for access to affordable housing and necessary supports;
- Strategies focusing on minimum or living wage, adequate income support levels, labour standards, and rental supplements;
- National childcare policies that support accessible and affordable childcare services for women fleeing domestic violence;
- Organized representation for rural shelters on a national level to strengthen the network, knowledge, practice etc. of rural shelters and advise the federal government and other bodies, and to develop a funding formula reflective of rural needs;
- Support for reliable data collection system on the rates, frequency, and types of violence and weapons used as well as the duration of violence and incidents of femicide allowing for better tracking and evaluation;
- Parameters for an integrated and outcomes-based management and accountability framework that supports research, evaluation and continuous improvement of VAW/GBV services grounded in on-going data collection, front line experience and knowledge, and an anti-racism lens.

## Attachment A: Key Resources

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