



Witness Brief from Women's Shelters Canada
Standing Committee on the Status of Women:
Study of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women
July 7, 2020

Good afternoon and thank you for this invitation. My name is Kaitlin Geiger-Bardswich, and I am the Communications and Development Manager at Women's Shelters Canada (or, WSC). WSC is a national organization representing the 550+ shelters and transition houses serving women and children affected by violence against women and intimate partner violence. We were created by the provincial and territorial shelter associations who wanted a voice on the national stage; today, these 14 associations are our full members and make up our Advisory Council.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, we held weekly Zoom meetings with our Advisory Council, both to support them in learning from each other's contexts and to provide us with a sense of what was happening across the country. These remarks are informed by their experiences.

I would like to begin by prefacing that while WSC's overall goal is to see an end to all violence against women, my remarks will focus on domestic violence, which includes family violence and intimate partner violence. I'm sure you will hear from other witnesses who will speak to other effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had on women, such as limits to reproductive choices and freedom, disproportionate job loss and increased childcare, and police violence against Indigenous and racialized people.

Before the COVID pandemic arrived in Canada, things were already bleak for women fleeing violence. In fact, many have called violence against women (or, VAW) the pandemic within the pandemic. The stats are indicative: every six days, a woman is killed by her current or former intimate partner. Indigenous women are 2.7 times more likely to be victims of violence than non-Indigenous women. However, femicide rates for Indigenous women are six times higher than non-Indigenous women. We know that certain groups such as women aged 15-24, racialized women, women living with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ people experience violence at disproportionate rates.

During COVID-19, this violence did not stop. In fact, it increased. Across the country, there have been reports of 20-30% increases in rates of domestic violence. Police in some areas have also noted an increase in domestic violence calls. In Ontario, the Assaulted Women's Helpline, a 24/7 crisis counselling service, has seen a total increase of 5% in the number of calls it received, but now four times as many of these calls were related to women seeking shelter. Several shelters told us that it was not just the number of calls that increased, but the severity of the abuse they were seeing.

Women's Shelters Canada's website, [Sheltersafe.ca](https://sheltersafe.ca), is an online clickable map for women, or friends and family, to find their closest shelter and it's 24/7 crisis number. In April 2020, visits to Sheltersafe were double what they were in March 2020 and compared to April 2019. Our May 2020 visits were

triple what they were in May 2019. We have also heard from shelters across the country that they are receiving more calls from family and friends trying to help their loved ones.

On the other hand, there have also been regions such as the Northwest Territories, PEI, Indigenous communities in Manitoba, and other rural and northern areas, where calls have been greatly reduced. We heard from some shelters that their phones were silent, their buildings nearly empty. This was perhaps even more terrifying than an increase in reported domestic violence because it meant that women, hunkering down at home as was recommended, were potentially trapped with their abusers and unable to call for help.

Anecdotally, we heard from our members that abusers were using the COVID-19 pandemic as another tool in their toolbox. Some shelters spoke of women calling them from inside a locked bathroom, saying they only had a few minutes to speak. Others noted that abusers told their partners that they would get COVID if they left the house, or threatened to tell their family and friends that they had COVID.

Various factors associated with COVID-19 likely influenced the heightened rates of violence against women. Various studies have shown that stress, job loss, alcohol intake, and mental health issues can all exacerbate violence. However, we want to stress that COVID-19 does not turn people into abusers. While the pandemic can aggravate stress and violence, we cannot blame the violence we've seen during COVID on the pandemic itself.

At times, the measures imposed by different levels of government had unintended consequences. Social isolation is an abuser's dream; now that this isolation was government-sanctioned, the situation for women living in violence worsened. Border closures also caused problems for some women. We heard of one woman who was fleeing her abuser in Alberta and tried to cross the Alberta-NWT border to stay with her mother in Yellowknife. She was refused entry into the territory and told to "go find a shelter in Alberta."

Too often, domestic violence can lead to domestic homicide, or femicide. In the first month of pandemic-related lockdowns in Canada, at least 9 women and girls were killed in suspected domestic homicides. This does not include the Nova Scotia shootings that occurred in mid-April, where nine men and 13 women were killed in a rampage that started with the perpetrator attacking his female partner in a case of domestic violence.

For women's shelters across the country, COVID-19 highlighted something we at Women's Shelters Canada have been saying for the last few years: that the services a woman can access when she's fleeing violence should not depend on her postal code. During the pandemic, we asked our member shelter associations what was happening in their province and territory in relation to five questions (updated at the end of June):

1. Are the VAW shelters/transition houses in your province/territory receiving provincial/territorial funds specifically for COVID-19?
 - a. Seven answered no, two answered yes, and three said it was complicated (for example, that some but not all shelters were receiving funds)
2. Is your provincial/territorial government ensuring shelters have PPE and EPA-standard cleaner?
 - a. Four said no, two yes, and six said it's complicated
3. Are VAW shelters/transition houses considered an essential service in your province/territory?
 - a. Two said no, six said yes, and four said it's complicated

4. In your province/territory, are VAW shelters/transition houses receiving priority access for COVID testing?
 - a. Five said no (including PEI, which said it wasn't needed), two said yes, and five said it was complicated
5. Has your premier or provincial/territorial government made a public statement about not staying home if home is not safe?
 - a. Three said no, five said yes, and four said it was complicated

While the federal government normally only funds on-reserve shelters (the rest are funded provincially or territorially), it did allocate \$26 million for VAW shelters and transition houses across the country due to COVID. The department of Women and Gender Equality asked Women's Shelters Canada to distribute \$20.5 million of these funds, which we agreed to do knowing how important it was for shelters to receive these funds quickly. COVID-19 emergency funds were distributed to over 400 shelters across the country; however, those in Quebec waited weeks if not months longer to receive their funds distributed by their provincial government.

We have also heard from several shelters expressing concern over eventual claw backs from their operational funds from their provincial government because they received these federal emergency COVID funds.

It wasn't all bad, of course. WSC personally saw an uptick in donations from individuals and organizations. We received our largest ever gift from the Rogers family last month. People were reaching out to us constantly by email and on social media to find out how they could help shelters across the country. We saw an increased number of stories in the press focused on domestic violence and the pandemic. We were also pleased to see the federal government's commitment to build 10 new shelters on-reserve and two in the territories. We have hope that this issue is now firmly on the agenda of both governments and individuals across the country.

Recommendations for a Potential Second Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. **Shelters need more core funding.** Before the pandemic, shelters were already grossly underfunded. Our More Than a Bed study published last year showed that 56% of shelters indicated that they could not meet their operating expenses without fundraising, while 11% said they could not meet their operational expenses even with fundraising. While the \$26 million given by the federal government was badly needed and gratefully accepted, it is a drop in the bucket.

We also echo Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada's call on the federal government to provide \$20 million in its next budget for transitional housing and shelters in Inuit Nunangat and Ottawa for Inuit women and children fleeing violence.

2. **All levels of government must stress the message to stay home only if home is safe.** Our sector worked diligently during the pandemic, using social media, traditional advertising, and countless media interviews, to get the message out there that shelters were open and available and that women did not need to stay home if home was not safe. In a second wave, all levels of government need to relay this message.

3. **Canada needs to look to promising practices from around the world when it comes to domestic violence and COVID-19.** For example, in Tunisia, there was a quarantine centre for women escaping domestic violence. In India, police checked up on women who had previously filed reports of domestic violence before the lockdown. In France, 20,000 hotel rooms were made available for survivors of domestic violence. New Zealand included domestic violence preparations in its lockdown planning from the start.
4. **The process of designing and implementing a multi-year National Action Plan on VAW and Gender-Based Violence must begin.** We have been advocating for this for over five years, with a coalition of organizations across the country. As you've heard, the situation for women fleeing violence and VAW shelters across the country during the COVID-19 pandemic differed according to where they were located. We are pleased with the current government's commitment to a National Action Plan and strongly urge that its development begins without delay. This NAP needs to be robust, well-resourced and intersectional if it is going to have a meaningful impact on the lives of women and gender diverse people in Canada.
5. **We stand with Indigenous women's organizations in calling on the federal government to move quickly to respond to the recommendations of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and implement a National Action Plan in response.**

Thank you for your time and I look forward to responding to your questions.