



**Input for the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women
on
Violence Against Women in the Context of Climate Crisis**

March 2022

The Canadian Women's Foundation is Canada's only national public foundation for women and girls and is one of the 10 largest women's foundations in the world. For over three decades, we have provided millions of dollars in funding to organizations across Canada that are moving women out of poverty and violence into safety and confidence.

Since the onset of the pandemic, we have worked in partnership with the Canadian Government's Department of Women and Gender Equality to distribute millions of dollars in emergency funding to the women's and gender justice sector. These funds have been necessary to help stabilize sexual assault centres and other community gender-based violence (GBV) services as they struggle to respond to the Shadow Pandemic of GBV.

We have also conducted research and consulted community leaders on emergency preparedness and response and what is needed to "shockproof" the women's and gender justice sector—and our communities—against predictable increases in the occurrence and severity of GBV in times of community-wide crisis. These learnings are applicable to the global climate emergency, in which GBV and worsening gender inequality are clear impacts of climate change, with disproportionate impacts on those who are further marginalized by anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, and/or discrimination based on immigration/citizenship status and/or income level.

Intersectional gender justice is necessary for meaningful GBV prevention and response, and for a just and equitable transition.

Gender-based violence is a climate crisis impact

The experiences of women and gender diverse people in Canada in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic provide further evidence of a troubling global phenomenon: when communities are under stress, GBV rates increase. Over the course of the pandemic, Canada has seen increasing rates of femicide. The Canadian Femicide Observatory reported 160 femicides in

2020, or an average of one woman or girl killed every 2.3 days in Canada.¹ In the first six months of 2021, they reported that 92 women and girls were killed – 14 more than in the same period in 2020, or close to a 20% increase.²

In the context of an emergency, whether it is a public health crisis, a major economic downturn, or a climate disaster like flooding or wildfires, a similar pattern emerges: an “eerie silence,”³ during which GBV services, women’s shelters, and crisis lines experience a decrease in survivor contacts and requests due to obstacles to reporting and access,⁴ followed by a surge in service demand and more complex needs among service users.

The isolation imposed on women and gender diverse people experiencing intimate partner violence during community emergencies helps to explain this trend. In the context of the now annual occurrence of wildfires and extreme heat events in British Columbia, GBV service providers report that poor air quality limits survivors’ mobility, as they are advised to remain indoors/at home, increasing their isolation. Few living on low incomes have the means to invest in air purification systems or cooling units, resulting in poor living conditions and worsening physical and mental health. In such contexts, abusers are further able to control their partners and limit access to supportive family, friends, and community services.⁵

For women and gender diverse people who have left violent homes for the safety of shelters, climate disasters can prevent them from accessing safety and interrupt their healing journeys. When severe flooding in High River, Alberta forced the evacuation of a local women’s shelter, some residents were triply displaced: first from their violent homes, then from their shelter, and then from the High River community altogether. Displacement disconnects survivors from their networks of support and access to trauma counselling and can lead them to second-guess their decision to leave abusive partners, putting them at risk of a return and further violence.⁶

In Canada, Indigenous women experience the highest rates of GBV. Statistics Canada reports that six in 10 Indigenous women have experienced some form of intimate partner violence in their lifetimes, and they are killed at seven times the rate of non-Indigenous women.⁷ In the context of climate crisis, they are most at risk. They are more likely to live in rural, remote, and northern areas and on First Nation reserves, where transportation, communication, and

¹ Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability (2021) “#CallItFemicide 2020 Report”

<https://femicideinCanada.ca/callitfemicide2020.pdf>

² Miller, Jason. “Killings of women and girls up again in Canada in 2021 as researchers point to pandemic stresses” *Toronto Star*. <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2021/11/25/killings-of-women-and-girls-up-again-in-canada-so-far-in-2021-as-researchers-point-to-pandemic.html>

³ Canadian Women’s Foundation (2021). *Insights from the Gender Justice Labs on Emergency Preparedness* (forthcoming).

⁴ Canadian Women’s Foundation (2022). *Learning Lessons from a Pandemic: Building Knowledge on Disaster Preparedness and Gender-Based Violence* (forthcoming).

⁵ McKenzie, A. (2022, March 14) Panelist. GBV in the Climate Crisis: Shockproofing Communities. NGO CSW Forum Parallel Event, Online.

⁶ Slodan, L. (2022, March 14) Panelist. GBV in the Climate Crisis: Shockproofing Communities. NGO CSW Forum Parallel Event, Online.

⁷ Statistics Canada (2021) “Intimate partner violence among diverse populations in Canada, 2018” <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210519/dq210519c-eng.htm>

disaster response infrastructure is limited. They are also more likely to live in poverty and have fewer resources available to them to adapt when a disaster occurs.⁸

In addition, Indigenous women experience increased rates of sexual violence related to extractive industries—primary contributors to climate change—many of which are located on Indigenous lands. Corporations establish “man camps” at extraction sites to house their primarily white, male transient workforce. These camps have been associated with significant increases in rates of sexual violence against Indigenous women.⁹

Women with disabilities are also disproportionately affected by violence. In Canada, they are three times more likely to experience violent victimization than those who do not live with a disability.¹⁰ In the context of a climate emergency or community-wide crisis, their specific needs are rarely considered or prioritized, particularly for those who experience mobility barriers due to interruptions to public transportation services or the closure and/or relocation of community services to less accessible locations.

For women and gender diverse survivors experiencing multiple oppressions, the onset of an environmental disaster or other community-wide emergency means that they must experience multiple crises at once; rebuilding their lives and recovering from their trauma is likely to take many years.

Failing to centre structural root causes and the voices of those most affected

In Canada and globally, there is little acknowledgement of the climate crisis as a manifestation of our extractive economic system that is grounded in colonization, patriarchy, and a capitalist worldview dependent on the exploitation of land and people. This context results in the structural exclusion of those who are most affected by climate change from decision-making on how best to respond, adapt, and mitigate its most harmful effects.¹¹

Despite established knowledge and experience of the gendered impacts of crisis within the women’s and gender justice sector and within affected communities in Canada, our recent research on the pandemic has been unable to identify any provincial, territorial, or municipal level emergency response plan that includes an explicit intersectional gender-based analysis (GBA+) or reference to GBV. As a result, agencies responsible for responding to community-wide crises, including environmental disasters, are ill-equipped to account for the wide range of individual needs resulting from multiple and complex systemic barriers.¹² Women, trans, and non-binary people from the most affected communities are largely left out of emergency

⁸ Bobrow, S., Gobby, J., Thibault, R., & Cantave, L. (2021). *Climate Change & Gender: A Literature Review for the Conseil des Montréalaises*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Statistics Canada (2021) “Criminal victimization in Canada, 2019”

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00014-eng.pdf?st=nJW4GfxF>

¹¹ Gobby, J. (2022, March 16) Panelist. Gender-based Violence in Climate Crisis: Forging Vital Connections. UNCSW Side Event, Online.

¹² Dugal, A. (2022, March 16) Panelist. Gender-based Violence in Climate Crisis: Forging Vital Connections. UNCSW Side Event, Online.

decision-making and climate policy, jeopardizing their immediate and long-term safety and security, and the well-being of the community as a whole.¹³

Inattention to the gendered impacts of community-wide crisis and the undervaluing of community expertise in emergency planning and climate policy at all levels results in the downloading of responsibility for responding to disastrous outcomes to community service providers. In the context of increasing rates of GBV, this means that Canada's chronically underfunded GBV sector¹⁴ is further stretched. Services must shift their priorities from providing shelter, safety planning, and trauma counselling supports to meeting their service users' immediate needs: evacuation/relocation, food security, access to financial resources, etc. GBV service providers do not have sufficient capacity to simultaneously meet immediate needs, address the impacts of violence in the lives of their service users, and respond to the resultant staff stress and burnout.

Good practices and ways forward

It is clear that the links between climate change and gender inequality, including the prevalence of GBV in the context of climate change, is under-researched. More feminist community-based research is needed to fully understand the gendered impacts of climate change and to point us to just and equitable solutions - both in Canada and globally. However, experiences of the pandemic and previous environmental disasters point to important lessons:

- Include a robust intersectional gender-based analysis (GBA+) in the creation of emergency preparedness plans and climate-related policies at all levels to ensure that systemic root causes are understood, accounted for, and addressed.
- Develop plans and policies in consultation and with the informed consent of women, trans, and non-binary people from the communities that are most affected, particularly First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities. Not only do Indigenous communities experience higher rates of and more severe violence, they hold valuable knowledge about how to respond to and mitigate climate change impacts.
- Recognize the centrality of the women's and gender justice sector to community response in times of crisis through sustainable funding and strengthened capacity sufficient to fulfill their mandates in "normal" times and respond to increased demand in crisis times.
- Address the communications, transportation, and basic service infrastructure needs of rural, remote, and northern communities in Canada, particularly on First Nations, to ensure they are able to respond and adapt to the ongoing crises of climate change and

¹³ Bobrow, S., Gobby, J., Thibault, R., & Cantave, L. (2021). *Climate Change & Gender: A Literature Review for the Conseil des Montréalaises*; Gobby, J. and Tully, K. (2022, March 16) Panelists. Gender-based Violence in Climate Crisis: Forging Vital Connections. UNCSW Side Event, Online; Hassen, Y. (2022, March 14) Panelist. GBV in the Climate Crisis: Shockproofing Communities. NGO CSW Forum Parallel Event, Online.

¹⁴ Canadian Women's Foundation (2020). *Resetting Normal: Funding a Thriving Women's Sector*. <https://fw3s926r0g42i6kes3bxg4i1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Resetting-Normal-Report-Womens-Sector.pdf>

GBV.

- Build power and cooperation across social movements to address connections between the exploitation of land, violent exploitation of people - particularly women, trans, and non-binary people - and environmental degradation that results in existential threat. This requires time and the allocation of financial resources to movement building and advocacy.

Climate change and other community-wide emergencies exacerbate the marginalization that communities are already well aware of. Addressing systemic and structural inequalities affecting women and gender diverse people—particularly those who are Black, Indigenous, and racialized; living with disabilities; and who experience discrimination based on their age, immigration/citizenship status, and/or income level—and creating communities of care and restoration are necessary for a just and equitable transition.

Contact

Karen Campbell
Director, Community Initiatives & Policy
kcampbell@canadianwomen.org

Canadian Women's Foundation
1920 Yonge St., Suite 302, Toronto, ON, M4S 3E2
www.CanadianWomen.org