

# Federal, Provincial and Territorial Government Actions to Address Gender-Based Violence During the Pandemic

## Terms

Federal, Provincial and Territorial (FPT), Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Gender-Based Violence in the Pandemic (GBViP), World Health Organization (WHO)

## What is this research about?

The purpose of this case study, funded by the Canadian Women’s Foundation and Women and Gender Equality Canada, was to advance knowledge about if and how FPT governments demonstrated effective crisis leadership in their response to the increase in GBV during the pandemic.

## What did the researchers do?

Researchers analyzed media releases issued by FPT governments between Feb. 2020 and Oct. 2021 that mentioned *GBV*, *IPV*, *domestic violence* or *family violence*. Researchers were looking for early recognition in government media releases about the potential for an increase in GBV during the pandemic and whether media releases demonstrated that governments took early action to address the increase in GBViP.

The search resulted in 206 releases; documents included media advisories, news releases, backgrounders and formal statements. Themes were identified and levels of attention given across jurisdictions during the pandemic were also compared. Additional analysis of the media releases was then undertaken to evaluate the timeliness of government actions in addressing the increase in GBViP.

## What did the researchers find?

There were significant jurisdictional differences in the number and timing of media releases related to GBViP. Reference to the increase in GBViP was mentioned in 40% of the 206 FPT media releases analyzed; however, in some provinces and territories, no media releases addressing the increase in GBViP were found. The remaining 60% of media releases were related to other government initiatives to address GBV, some of which had been initiated prior to the pandemic. Further, some jurisdictions demonstrated early recognition of the increase in GBViP, while others appeared to be delayed in their response or did not respond at all.

**Note:** In some instances, there were several different releases related to the same topic (e.g., multiple announcements in different communities about the same funding initiative), thus the total number of releases gives a sense of the frequency of communication, but is not necessarily reflective of the number of initiatives undertaken.

## Federal Government Response to GBViP

While the federal government gave significant attention to the increase in GBV during the pandemic, their communication also reflected continued attention to and funding of GBV and human trafficking strategies. Additionally, the federal government introduced legislation that aimed to prevent the use of firearms in IPV. As time progressed, federal government communication also acknowledged that preventative public health measures and the resulting effects (e.g., loss of employment) were having a disproportionate impact on women more generally.

## Provincial and Territorial Responses to GBViP

Five themes were identified within media releases specifically addressing the increase in GBViP:

<b>Funding Support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All provinces and territories (excluding NB, NT and NU) announced funding initiatives to address GBV, IPV or family violence, with some funding specifically to support rapid adaptation of service delivery; funding was given to domestic violence shelters, sexual assault centres and other organizations doing primary prevention or response work</li> </ul>
<b>Public Awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dedicated days, weeks or other periods of time focused on raising public awareness of GBV, IPV or family violence; some governments used these occasions to make announcements about funding or other GBV initiatives and recognize the vulnerability of specific groups</li> </ul>
<b>Recognition of Intersectionality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>News releases highlighted the disproportionate impacts of GBV on Indigenous women and girls and announced funding to support this high-risk population</li> <li>Government attention was given to addressing GBV in specific settings (i.e., stay-at-home restrictions, workplace, post-secondary campuses)</li> </ul>
<b>Expansion of Programs and Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Announced support and investments for three types of new programs and initiatives:                             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provision of legal advice and assistance to victims of domestic and interpersonal violence</li> <li>Expansion of sexual assault services</li> <li>Enhancements to crisis lines</li> </ol> </li> <li>Three provinces announced new programs to help victims of violence navigate the justice system (YT, PE, MB)</li> <li>Some governments acted to increase accessibility to crisis lines and reduce barriers to accessing timely support, and some addressed communication challenges in rural and remote communities</li> </ul>
<b>Legislation, Policy and Procedure Change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some governments announced changes to legislation, policy or procedures pertaining to victims of different forms of GBV; other legislative actions announced during the pandemic included changes related to family law and other laws referencing domestic and family violence</li> <li>These were the only media releases that did not include any reference to the increase in GBV during the pandemic; the content of these releases suggests that most of these changes were initiated prior to the pandemic, with legislation coming into force during the pandemic</li> </ul>

## Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Response to GBViP

There were significant differences across jurisdictions in the timing of the first government communications acknowledging the increase in GBViP and timing of action to address the increased risk of GBViP. Three different levels of crisis leadership and crisis communication were exhibited.

### 1. Early Public Acknowledgment and Action to Address GBViP

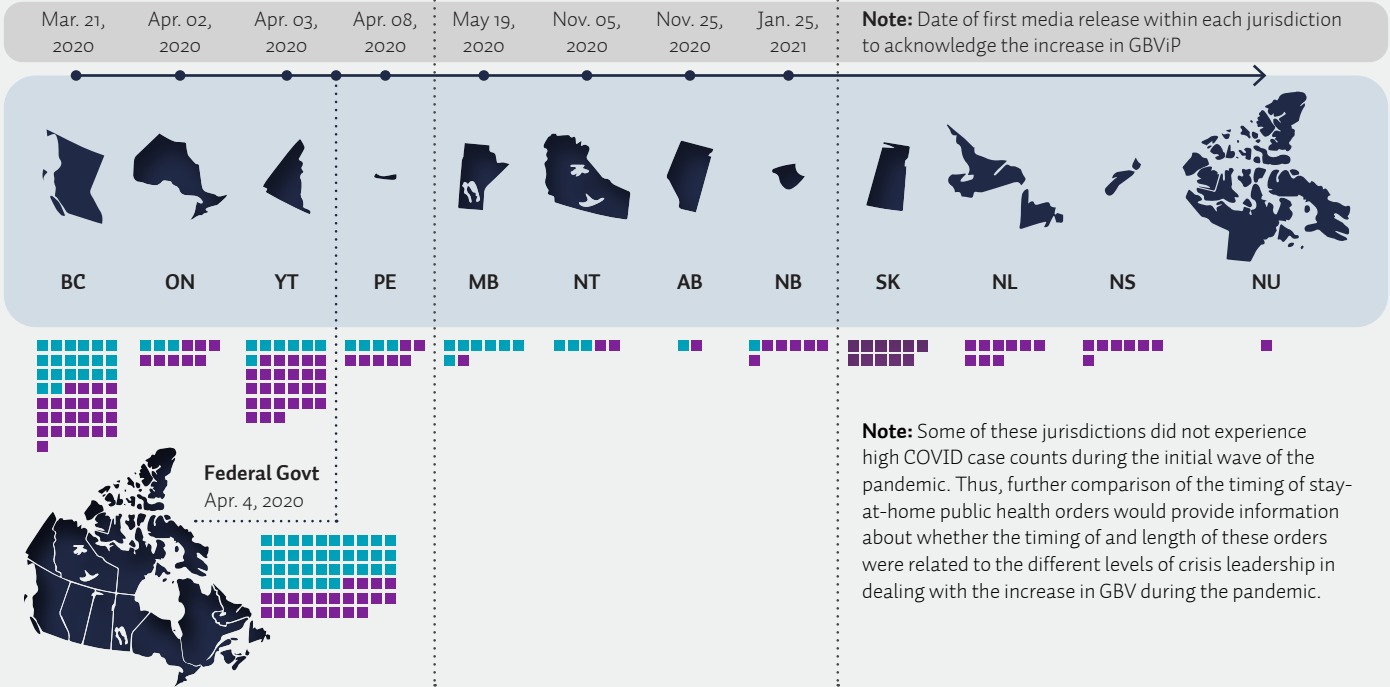
Issued first news releases about GBViP and took early preventative or mitigative action within a month of the WHO declaring a pandemic on Mar. 11, 2020, and prior to, or concurrent with, UN Women's media release on Apr. 6, 2020. Took early actions to address GBViP. Demonstrated effective crisis leadership.

### 2. Late Public Acknowledgment and Action to Address GBViP

Posted media releases noting an increase in GBViP, but communication was not issued and action was not taken until over two months after the WHO declared a pandemic and UN Women gave attention to the increase in GBV as a shadow pandemic. Demonstrated late attention to crisis leadership tasks in dealing with GBViP.

### 3. No Public Acknowledgment or Action to Address GBViP

Continued to issue media releases about GBV during the pandemic, but made no mention of how stay-at-home or other public health protection orders contributed to the increase in GBViP. Did not appear to take specific action to address GBViP. Did not demonstrate effective crisis management of GBViP.



#### Legend

- COVID related media releases pertaining to GBV (Feb. 2020 - Oct. 2021)
- Non-COVID related media releases pertaining to GBV (Feb. 2020 - Oct. 2021)

**Note:** The province of Quebec was excluded from this analysis, which only examined media releases issued in English.

## Conclusion

International guidance on GBV in disaster contexts, including pandemics, advocates for the use of the precautionary principle, which means taking early action to address GBViP in the absence of confirmatory evidence. Further, effective crisis leadership tasks include early recognition and communication about a threat, and demonstration of early action to address the threat. Thus, early communication and action by FPT governments to address the increase in GBViP early in the pandemic was expected. While the media releases issued by some governments demonstrated effective attention to key crisis leadership tasks in their management of the response to GBViP, other governments appeared to be late in responding or neglected to acknowledge and address the problem.

Although it is not possible to judge whether FPT governments did everything they could to address the increase in GBV during the pandemic, the findings from this study demonstrate that some governments appeared to be more effective than others in responding to the threat, which should have been anticipated.

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