

# CLOSING THE GENDER GAP IN DISASTER & EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS



Canadian Women's Foundation, September 2023

Preparing for disasters and emergencies and managing their impacts on communities is a critical shared responsibility across all levels of government in Canada. In an era of multiple and simultaneous crises, it is essential that Canada's disaster and emergency management strategies, at all levels of government, account for the needs of those most who stand to be most adversely affected. Current disaster and emergency management strategies in Canada do not adequately account for the needs and predictable outcomes for women and gender diverse people, particularly those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Since 2021, the Canadian Women's Foundation has partnered with academics and practitioners working at the intersection of emergency preparedness and gender. Through research and engagement with our grantees and partners nationally, we have documented the missing dimension of gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) in Canada's disaster and emergency management and response plans, and the impacts of this gap on the lives and livelihoods of women and gender diverse people across the country.

The Canadian Women's Foundation is Canada's public foundation for gender justice and equality. Since 1991, our generous donors and supporters have contributed more than \$185 million to fund over 3,000 life-transforming programs throughout Canada. We engage a national network of community-based experts in pressing issues that affect women, girls, and gender-diverse people, with a focus on those who face multiple barriers, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, Black and racialized communities, youth, people living with disabilities, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, newcomers, migrants, and sex workers. We champion a spirit of shared responsibility for progressive change, restorative action, truth and reconciliation, and an end to systemic discrimination.

### THE DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS OF DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES

Substantial evidence, globally and in Canada, indicates that the people most adversely affected during and after disasters and emergencies are those already experiencing systemic inequality. In Canada this means women and gender diverse people; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities; Black and racialized women; immigrant and precarious-status women; people living with a disability; and people living on low incomes. Their needs must be prioritized in disaster and emergency planning.

Crises and emergencies deepen systemic inequalities. We have seen this pattern play out in a range of emergencies, from the pandemic, to wildfires, and floods. Those who already experience discrimination face the most acutely damaging effects of disasters and their aftermaths and endure the longest wait for recovery as gender-based violence rates skyrocket, economic insecurity deepens, access to housing, food, and healthcare services are compromised, and families are displaced from their communities. Barring deliberate and effective course correction, ongoing inequalities will deepen in the face of multiple and simultaneous emergencies.

### THE GENDER GAP IN DISASTER AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Research shows that hazard and risk assessments and the disaster and emergency plans that flow from them do not take the gendered realities of immediate crisis impacts and their aftermath into account. Despite official commitments to apply GBA+ to all policies and programs, the federal government has yet to provide provincial, territorial, and municipal emergency planners with specific or sufficient guidance on the use of GBA+. Most emergency plans fail to even mention women:

- In six reviewed federal-level plans, two mentioned “women,” three mentioned “gender,” and one mentioned “violence.”
- A review of 28 regional plans found that two referred to “gender”, five mentioned “women” and two mentioned “domestic violence.”
- At the municipal level, where much of the hands-on response to disasters occurs, a review of 24 emergency planning documents found no reference to women or gender.

Building the capacity of professionals in this field and raising the standards for disaster and emergency management in Canada is necessary if plans are to respond to the needs and lived realities of those who stand to be most impacted by community-wide disasters and emergencies.

### CONSEQUENCES OF THE GENDER GAP IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

One month into the pandemic, UN Women named the surging rates of violence against women and girls a global “Shadow Pandemic” and called on governments to act. In Canada, femicide rates increased by 26% from 2019 to 2021 and calls to crisis lines surged. These horrendous outcomes for women’s safety were entirely predictable. Research in the wake of previous disasters and emergencies had already documented the link between community-wide crises and increased rates of gender-based violence.

And violence was not the only gendered consequence of the crisis. Women, particularly Black, racialized, migrant and low-income women, bore the brunt of economic losses during the pandemic emergency, and an uncertain recovery has not ushered in stability and security.

In this context, organizations providing services to women and gender-diverse people struggled to manage untenable caseloads. Not only were they dealing with surging rates of gender-based violence, but they were pivoting from providing crisis counselling and safety planning to preparing food hampers and navigating CERB eligibility for those whose livelihoods had been compromised. Combined with a chronic lack of resources and unrelenting stress, this led to what Women’s Shelter’s Canada has dubbed a “feminist brain drain”: an exodus of experienced service providers from the sector.

Because the needs of women and gender diverse people who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination were not adequately considered in risk assessments and pandemic and emergency plans, community-based organizations in a chronically underfunded and over-stretched sector had to step in to fill the gaps. For example:

- Public health “stay home to stay safe” messaging did not account for those who are unsafe at home or refer survivors to available crisis lines and services, which required shelters and sexual assault centres to amplify their online presence, particularly on social media, to inform the public that their services remained open and available to those experiencing violence.
- Undocumented and precarious status migrants were not adequately accounted for in local vaccine roll-out plans, which required organizations serving immigrants, refugees, and non-status people to work with local public health officials to facilitate and expand COVID-19 vaccine access and uptake.
- Public health emergency plans treated the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in isolation of the multiple and ongoing crises some communities were already facing. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities confronting food scarcity, overcrowded housing, unsafe drinking water, and substandard health care and mental health supports had to stretch their limited resources further to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their communities.

### CLOSING THE GAP IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Converging factors make this post-pandemic period the ideal time to improve emergency planning processes. In recent years, the sheer number of large-scale, overlapping disasters—the pandemic, wildfires, floods, droughts, and extreme weather events—has underscored the importance of excellent, evidence-based emergency planning to protect everyone.

Work to incorporate GBA+ in disaster planning and response is happening internationally. For example, Gender and Disaster Australia, a publicly funded network of emergency management practitioners and academics, offers evidence-based education, training, and other resources to improve “inclusive responses” to disasters, guided by an expert advisory committee. A similar body in Canada could provide guidance and support to officials tasked with planning and responding to the emergencies ahead. The Government of Canada is prioritizing GBA+ in its international disaster management and relief operations through the Feminist International Assistance Policy; similar attention can and should be given to domestic responses.

### THE CANADIAN WOMEN'S FOUNDATION'S WORK ON GBA+ IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

The Canadian Women's Foundation welcomes the opportunity to partner with government to close the gender gap in emergency management and preparedness, which is increasingly urgent in the face of mounting climate disasters.

Seeing the disproportionate impacts of a range of disasters and emergencies on the communities we seek to support—namely women and gender diverse people experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination—the Canadian Women's Foundation has already taken steps to identify and respond to the gap in GBA+ in emergency preparedness in Canada.

Since 2021, we have:

- Documented the gender gap in Canada's emergency preparedness systems through commissioning new research on gender in emergency planning, in partnership with community organizations and academic experts in the field of Disaster & Emergency Management.
- *Insights from the Gender Justice Labs on Emergency Preparedness*, May 2022.

- Learning Lessons from a Pandemic: Building Knowledge on Disaster Preparedness & Gender-Based Violence. Research Snapshot, January 2022.
- Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Government Actions to Address Gender-Based Violence During the Pandemic. Research Snapshot, 2022.
- Recognition of the Gendered Impacts of Disasters: A Missing Dimension in Canadian Emergency Management and Pandemic Plans. Research Snapshot, 2022.
- Collaborated with feminist emergency management experts to create Service Continuity Guidelines for the GBV sector to build the emergency management capacity of community organizations, supporting them to identify critical functions and develop paths to fortify them, grounded in GBA+. We are currently working to turn these guidelines into an accessible, bilingual online course for community organizations to build their capacity to use this critical tool.
- Secured funding from Public Safety Canada to build a toolkit for municipal-level emergency planners to incorporate GBA+ in their hazard, risk, and vulnerability assessments in partnership with the Canadian Municipal Network on Crime Prevention.
- Raised public awareness of the importance of incorporating GBA+ in the emergency management through media, public presentations, and events.
  - Do emergency plans really protect women? Hill Times, June 5, 2023.
  - Gender must not be an afterthought in emergency preparedness. TVO Today, May 8, 2023.
  - Disaster and Emergency Management: Emergent Responses. Panel discussion at Shockproofing Communities Summit, hosted by Canadian Women's Foundation, March 2023.
  - Gender-Based Violence in the Climate Crisis: Shockproofing Communities. A parallel event to the 66th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, hosted by Canadian Women's Foundation, March 2022.
  - The Future of Safer Communities. Keynote Presentation, Canadian Municipal Network on Crime Prevention, November 2022.
  - Exploring the Intersections of Gender & Climate Change in Canada. Workshop, Canadian Municipal Network on Crime Prevention, November 2022.

Partnering with the Canadian Women's Foundation will allow decision-makers and officials to benefit from our expertise on the GBA+ process and leverage our relationships with disaster and emergency management academics and practitioners leading the way on the integration of GBA+ and with thousands of community-based organizations across Canada responding in real-time to community needs during and after disasters to increase safety for women and gender diverse people.



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