



**CANADA**

SUBMISSION TO THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN ON COVID-19 AND THE INCREASE OF  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Amnesty International submits this briefing to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović, in response to her [request to receive all relevant information](#) on the increase of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from civil society, States, National Human Rights Institutions, international organisations, academia and other stakeholders.

## 2. INCREASE IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

***To what extent has there been an increase of violence against women, especially domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns? Please provide all available data on the increase of violence against women, including domestic violence and femicides, registered during the COVID-19 crisis.***

The government of Canada held discussions with provincial and territorial governments and civil society organizations and determined there has been a 20-30% increase in gender-based violence and domestic violence in parts of Canada during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Women's Foundation reports that women, girls, transgender, and non-binary people face an increased risk of violence due to COVID-19 isolation measures.<sup>2</sup> In a one month period covering April and May, there were nine confirmed cases of domestic homicide in Canada; from April 18-19 a mass shooting in Nova Scotia, which reports say was fueled by misogyny, killed 22 people.<sup>3</sup> In May, an Indigenous woman died in what police believe was the second case of an Indigenous woman being murdered by an intimate partner in Winnipeg, Manitoba during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Canada lacks comprehensive government data collection on femicide, and the actual number of femicides is likely higher than figures reported by the media and police. Police reports do not accurately capture the scope of domestic violence since many women, transgender, and non-binary people do not report domestic

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<sup>1</sup> Raisa Patel, "Minister says COVID-19 is empowering domestic violence rates in certain regions," CBC, 27 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/domestic-violence-rates-rising-due-to-covid19-1.5545851>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Gunraj & Jessica Howard, "Why is the COVID-19 Pandemic linked to more gender-based violence," Canadian Women's Foundation, 9 April 2020, <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/covid-19-pandemic-gender-based-violence/>.

<sup>3</sup> BWSS, "Ten cases of men killing women in Canada in the last 36 days," BWSS, 6 May 2020, <https://www.bwss.org/nine-cases-of-gender-based-violence-resulted-in-deaths-in-past-36-days-in-canada/>; and Heidi Petracek and Melanie Price, "Focus on femicide: the Nova Scotia shootings' connection to domestic violence," CTV, 28 April 2020, <https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/focus-on-femicide-the-nova-scotia-shootings-connection-to-domestic-violence-1.4915852>.

<sup>4</sup> Dana Hatherly, "Domestic violence 'an epidemic' advocate says after 2 Indigenous women killed in Winnipeg during pandemic," CBC, 27 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/indigenous-victims-domestic-violence-homicides-1.5574176>.

violence to police.<sup>5</sup> The 2014 General Social Survey on Canadians' Safety reported that about 70% of individuals who experienced spousal violence did not report this violence to the police.<sup>6</sup>

Statistics Canada reports that one in 10 women was concerned about an increase in domestic violence during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> The Native Women's Association of Canada surveyed 250 Indigenous women and found that one in five reported experiencing physical or psychological violence in the past three months; most of the violence was committed by an intimate partner.<sup>8</sup> Across the country some police services have reported increases in domestic violence, while others report no changes or decreases.<sup>9</sup> Lockdown measures where women are self-isolating with their abusers may mean women are increasingly under surveillance and are less able to call for help, which may explain decreases in call volume especially in rural communities.<sup>10</sup>

Since the pandemic began, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in Airdrie, Alberta reported decreases in domestic violence calls, though Airdrie P.O.W.E.R., an organization working with women experiencing violence, was overwhelmed with increased calls.<sup>11</sup> In Ontario, the York Regional Police reported a 22% increase in domestic incidents since 17 March when stay-at-home measures were introduced.<sup>12</sup> In Saskatchewan, the Saskatoon Police Service reported a 10% increase in domestic violence calls since social distancing measures were introduced.<sup>13</sup> The Peel Region in Ontario<sup>14</sup>, the Winnipeg Police in Manitoba<sup>15</sup> and the Victoria Police in British Columbia reported no significant increases in reported domestic violence since the pandemic began.<sup>16</sup> Disparities in the increase in domestic violence calls reported by different police forces do not necessarily point to trends in domestic violence across the country because the time period covered is not long enough to provide accurate statistical trending data, and because victims may not be able to reach out for support while in lockdown with an abuser.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Gillis, "Forced to stay home with their abusers, Canadian victims of domestic violence must 'choose between two pandemics'," *The Star*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/04/20/forced-to-stay-home-with-their-abusers-canadian-victims-of-domestic-violence-must-choose-between-two-pandemics.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Marta Burczykca, "Section 3: Police-reported intimate partner violence," Statistics Canada 17 January 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54893/03-eng.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada, "Canadian Perspective Survey Series 1: Impacts of COVID-19," 8 April 2010, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200408/dq200408c-eng.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Teresa Wright, "Violence against Indigenous women during COVID-19 sparks calls for MMIWG plan," CP24, 10 May 2020, <https://www.cp24.com/news/violence-against-indigenous-women-during-covid-19-sparks-calls-for-mmiwg-plan-1.4932824>.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Gillis, "Forced to stay home with their abusers, Canadian victims of domestic violence must 'choose between two pandemics'," *The Star*, 20 April 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/04/20/forced-to-stay-home-with-their-abusers-canadian-victims-of-domestic-violence-must-choose-between-two-pandemics.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Raisa Patel, "Minister says COVID-19 is empowering domestic violence abusers as rates rise in parts of Canada," CBC, 27 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/domestic-violence-rates-rising-due-to-covid19-1.5545851>.

<sup>11</sup> Leanne Allison, "Airdrie P.O.W.E.R. says RCMP domestic violence stats just one piece of the puzzle," *Discover Airdrie*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.discoverairdrie.com/local/airdrie-power-says-rcmp-domestic-violence-stats-just-one-piece-of-the-puzzle>.

<sup>12</sup> Raisa Patel, "Minister says COVID-19 is empowering domestic violence abusers as rates rise in parts of Canada," CBC, 27 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/domestic-violence-rates-rising-due-to-covid19-1.5545851>.

<sup>13</sup> David Shield, "Saskatoon police continue to see rise in domestic violence calls, post COVID-19," CBC, 21 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/saskatoon-police-continue-to-see-rise-in-domestic-violence-calls-post-covid-19-1.5578323>.

<sup>14</sup> Faiza Amin, "Domestic violence calls surge during coronavirus pandemic," *CityNews*, 8 April 2020, <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2020/04/08/domestic-violence-calls-surge-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Humphreys, "Crime in a time of COVID-19: How the pandemic is changing criminality in our neighbourhoods," *National Post*, 3 April 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/news/crime-in-a-time-of-covid-19-how-the-pandemic-is-changing-criminality-in-our-neighbourhoods>.

<sup>16</sup> Brishti Basu, "No spike in domestic abuse police reports in Victoria during lockdown, but experts concerned," *Victoria Buzz*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.victoriabuzz.com/2020/04/no-spike-in-domestic-violence-police-reports-in-victoria-during-pandemic-but-experts-concerned/>.

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Humphreys, "Crime in a time of COVID-19: How the pandemic is changing criminality in our neighbourhoods," *National Post*, 3 April 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/news/crime-in-a-time-of-covid-19-how-the-pandemic-is-changing-criminality-in-our-neighbourhoods>.

# 3. HELPLINES

## ***Are helplines run by Government and/or civil society available? Has there been an increase in the number of calls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?***

Government and civil society helplines are available throughout Canada. Many helplines report increased calls, while others report no change or decreased demand. Women who are in lockdown with their abuser may be unable to phone helplines.<sup>18</sup> This increases the importance of alternative methods of communication since it can be difficult to reach out for help by phone while sharing a living space with an abusive partner during lockdown.<sup>19</sup> Recognizing this barrier to accessing support, an organization in Ottawa, Ontario launched a local texting and web chat service to provide chat support to women who are unable to phone helplines.<sup>20</sup>

Women's Shelters Canada operates the Sheltersafe online database of violence against women shelters across Canada; web traffic in March 2020 was double compared to March 2019, and triple in April 2020 compared to April 2019.<sup>21</sup> A survey by the Canadian Women's Foundation reported that over half of service providers indicated increases of up to 30% in demand for services.<sup>22</sup> Many helplines have reported increases in calls during the pandemic including a 57% increase in calls to the Albertan sexual violence helpline, Alberta's One line,<sup>23</sup> and a 300% increase in calls to Battered Women's Support Services (BWSS) in British Columbia.<sup>24</sup>

Other organizations have not reported an increased demand in services. The Ending Violence Association of BC reports staff have not generally seen increases in the nearly 300 programs across the province.<sup>25</sup> The YWCA shelter in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, had no clients in April, leading advocates to fear that people experiencing violence might not feel they were able to escape while in lockdown.<sup>26</sup> Civil society organizations expect calls will increase as lockdown measures are lifted.<sup>27</sup> In British Columbia, the Haven Society has reported that as COVID-19 restrictions ease, the demand for their services has increased.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Brishti Basu, "No spike in domestic abuse police reports in Victoria during lockdown, but experts concerned," Victoria Buzz, 8 April 2020, <https://www.victoriabuzz.com/2020/04/no-spike-in-domestic-violence-police-reports-in-victoria-during-pandemic-but-experts-concerned/>.

<sup>19</sup> Julie Ireton, "New text, chat services gets abuse victims help during pandemic," CBC, 14 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/new-web-chat-text-service-for-victims-domestic-abuse-ottawa-during-covid-19-1.5528572>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Gillis, "Forced to stay home with their abusers, Canadian victims of domestic violence must 'choose between two pandemics'," The Star, 20 April 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/04/20/forced-to-stay-home-with-their-abusers-canadian-victims-of-domestic-violence-must-choose-between-two-pandemics.html>; and email from Women's Shelter Canada, 19 June 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation, "Resetting Normal: Funding a Thriving Women's Sector," 2020 May, <https://canadianwomen.org/resetting-normal/>.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Rieger, "Alberta sexual violence helpline saw 57% rise in calls during 1<sup>st</sup> month of pandemic," CBC 27 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-sexual-violence-1.5587207>.

<sup>24</sup> Rumina Daya & Jon Azpiri, "Calls to Vancouver domestic-violence crisis line spike 300% amid COVID-19 pandemic," Global News, 7 April 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6789403/domestic-violence-coronavirus/>.

<sup>25</sup> Roshini Nair, "Domestic violence organizations prepare for possible surge due to COVID-19 isolation," CBC, 28 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/family-violence-bc-1.5547385>.

<sup>26</sup> "YWCA director concerned after family violence shelter use drops to zero amid pandemic," CBC, 7 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/domestic-violence-shelters-nwt-covid-19-1.5556398>.

<sup>27</sup> Raisa Patel, "Minister says COVID-19 is empowering domestic violence rates in certain regions," CBC, 27 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/domestic-violence-rates-rising-due-to-covid19-1.5545851>.

<sup>28</sup> Cloe Logan, "COVID-19: Island crisis line calls rise as restrictions ease," Vancouver Island Free Daily, 1 June 2020, <https://www.vancouverislandfreedaily.com/news/covid-19-island-crisis-line-calls-rise-as-restrictions-ease/>.

# 4. EXEMPTIONS FROM LOCKDOWN MEASURES

## ***Can women victims of domestic violence be exempted from restrictive measures to stay at home in isolation if they face domestic violence?***

Women, transgender, and non-binary people experiencing violence are exempt from social distancing measures and women's shelters have been declared essential services in most provinces and territories and have remained open throughout the pandemic. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government provided a one-time boost of approximately \$26 million in funding to women's shelters "that provide a sanctuary when self-isolating at home is not an option,"<sup>29</sup> recognizing that people may need to leave home for safety reasons. Civil society organizations advocated for clearer messaging from governments, particularly in the first phase of lockdown, to ensure people knew they did not need to stay at home if home was not a safe place. Despite being open, some organizations expressed concern that not all women were aware that services were still available.<sup>30</sup>

# 5. SHELTERS

## ***Are shelters open and available? Are there any alternatives to shelters available if they are closed or without sufficient capacity?***

Shelters were deemed an essential service in most provinces and territories and have remained open throughout the pandemic.<sup>31</sup> Staying open, in some cases, has been a challenge. The Native Women's Shelter of Montreal, for example, had to temporarily close because of a COVID-19 outbreak at its facility and a reported lack of government support to provide early testing of staff and residents, personal protective equipment, and professional cleaning services.<sup>32</sup>

More rigorous cleaning and sanitation procedures are now required at shelters.<sup>33</sup> Many have introduced measures to allow women and families using shelters to maintain social distance and self-isolate. This includes limiting families to use their own bathrooms and reducing the number of people in communal areas.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Perlita Stroh, "COVID-19 isolation measures increase risk for those in abusive relationships," CBC, 29 March 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/covid-isolation-risks-abusive-relationships-1.5510551>.

<sup>30</sup> "Groups report increase in calls for victims of domestic violence in northeastern Ontario," CBC, 27 March 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/domestic-violence-reports-covid-1.5586890>.

<sup>31</sup> Raisa Patel, "Minister says COVID-19 is empowering domestic violence rates in certain regions," CBC, 27 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/domestic-violence-rates-rising-due-to-covid19-1.5545851>.

<sup>32</sup> Annie Leclair, "Native Women's Shelter of Montreal closes after COVID-19 Outbreak," Global News, 19 May 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6957369/native-womens-shelter-of-montreal-closes-after-covid-19-outbreak/>.

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Gunraj & Jessica Howard, "Why is the COVID-19 pandemic linked to more gender-based violence," Canadian Women's Foundation, 9 April 2020, <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/covid-19-pandemic-gender-based-violence/>.

<sup>34</sup> Raisa Patel, "Minister says COVID-19 is empowering domestic violence rates in certain regions," CBC, 27 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/domestic-violence-rates-rising-due-to-covid19-1.5545851>.

To allow for social distancing and in some cases cope with increasing numbers, shelters such as Regina Transition House have made agreements to rent space in hotels.<sup>35</sup> However, using hotel space can be costly and shelters have expressed concern that as demand and costs increase they will have to turn people away.<sup>36</sup> Finding safe spaces to transition women from shelters into the community has become increasingly difficult because social distancing measures may prevent women from viewing apartments,<sup>37</sup> and some landlords may be unwilling to rent to new tenants during the pandemic.<sup>38</sup> Long-term solutions regarding the housing supply shortage have not been adequately addressed.<sup>39</sup>

The Ontario Association of Interval and Transitional Houses has reported an increase in intake requests at shelters.<sup>40</sup> Since physical distancing has decreased shelter capacity, some facilities have been forced to turn women, transgender, and non-binary people away.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the pandemic, shelter spaces were already unable to keep pace with demand. Shelter Voices, an annual survey of shelters and transition houses serving women and children impacted by violence conducted by Women's Shelters Canada, reported that on a single day, 78.8% of those seeking shelter space were turned away because of a lack of available space.<sup>42</sup>

While organizations serving women, transgender, and non-binary people experiencing violence have continued to operate during the pandemic, they have done so with limited financial resources. While the federal government provided a one-time increase in funding to shelters, crisis centers, and other organizations servicing gender-based violence survivors in the context of the pandemic because of increased demand for services, funding remains insufficient to meet needs. A survey of service providers found that 80% were concerned about being able to continue to deliver services.<sup>43</sup>

## 6. PROTECTION ORDERS

### *Are protection orders available and accessible in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Provincial courts continue to hear urgent matters including urgent family matters such as protection orders. Each provincial court has their own procedures for filing and determining if a matter is "urgent" and will be heard. For example, in Ontario, hearings for urgent family matters as determined by a judge are conducted via conference call unless a judge orders otherwise.<sup>44</sup> Cases in family court proceed on a

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<sup>35</sup> Nicole Bogart, "Advocates scramble to help domestic abuse victims as calls skyrocket during COVID-19," CTV, 3 May 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/advocates-scramble-to-help-domestic-abuse-victims-as-calls-skyrocket-during-covid-19-1.4923109>.

<sup>36</sup> Faiza Amin, "Domestic violence calls surge during coronavirus pandemic," CityNews, 8 April 2020, <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2020/04/08/domestic-violence-calls-surge-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

<sup>37</sup> Andrea Gunraj & Jessica Howard, "Why is the COVID-19 pandemic linked to more gender-based violence," Canadian Women's Foundation, 9 April 2020, <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/covid-19-pandemic-gender-based-violence/>.

<sup>38</sup> Ashley Newport, "COVID-19 could be making domestic violence victims less likely to come forward in Halton," inHalton, 4 May 2020, <https://www.inhalton.com/covid-19-could-be-making-domestic-violence-victims-less-likely-to-come-forward-in-halton>.

<sup>39</sup> Alastair Sharp, "A spike in domestic violence happening in Toronto due to COVID-19 experts say," National Observer, 28 April 2020, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/04/28/news/spike-domestic-violence-happening-toronto-due-covid-19-experts-say>.

<sup>40</sup> Perlita Stroh, "COVID-19 isolation measures increase risk for those in abusive relationships," CBC, 29 March 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/covid-isolation-risks-abusive-relationships-1.5510551>.

<sup>41</sup> Omar Sachedina & Jonathan Forani, "Domestic violence increases with 'stay home' pandemic response," CTV, 6 April 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/domestic-violence-increases-with-stay-home-pandemic-response-1.4885597>.

<sup>42</sup> "Shelter Voices 2019", Women's Shelters Canada, April 2019, <https://endvaw.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Shelter-Voices-2019.pdf> *Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.*

<sup>43</sup> Jessica Howard, "Survey says: Women's services need support as we emerge from COVID-19 pandemic," Canadian Women's Foundation, 21 May 2020, <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/survey-says-womens-services-need-support-as-we-emerge-from-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>44</sup> OCJ, "COVID-19: Scheduling of family matters in the Ontario Court of Justice," Ontario Court of Justice, 7 May 2020, <https://www.ontariocourts.ca/ocj/covid-19/covid-19-family-matters/>.



prioritized basis with priority given to such hearings as those involving restraining orders and custody matters. In British Columbia, an Urgent Application Form can be completed online and emailed to the local court to apply for a protection order.<sup>45</sup>

## 7. ACCESS TO JUSTICE

***What are the impacts on women's access to justice? Are courts open and providing protection and decisions in cases of domestic violence?***

While courts have been adjourned for most non-urgent matters since mid-March, it is possible to apply for urgent motions for support and bring a domestic violence case in front of a judge.<sup>46</sup> For issues not considered serious enough to be an “urgent” matter, however, cases may remain in a state of limbo with no clear indication as to when cases will be scheduled and placed on the docket.<sup>47</sup>

Finances are a barrier to accessing justice. Without sufficient funding for legal aid, individuals may be unable to access the courts with legal representation.<sup>48</sup> The Law Society of Ontario launched a telephone line to help self-represented individuals determine if their family court matter will meet the criteria of “urgent.”<sup>49</sup>

Manitoulin Family Resources in Ontario expressed concern that early release of people in custody could lead to domestic violence.<sup>50</sup> While uncertain and inconsistent, courts have generally moved to release more prisoners because of the increased risk of contracting COVID-19 in custody. In the court system in Hamilton, Ontario the bail safety unit is working to ensure the safety of the public and holding accused abusers for bail.<sup>51</sup>

## 8. ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

***What are the impacts of the current restrictive measures and lockdowns on women's access to health services? Please specify whether services are closed or suspended, particularly those focusing on reproductive health.***

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<sup>45</sup> “COVID-19 FAQs,” Provincial Court of British Columbia, 5 May 2020, <https://www.provincialcourt.bc.ca/COVID19-FAQ#po01>.

<sup>46</sup> Nicole Bogart, “Advocates scramble to help domestic abuse victims as calls skyrocket during COVID-19,” CTV, 3 May 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/advocates-scramble-to-help-domestic-abuse-victims-as-calls-skyrocket-during-covid-19-1.4923109>.

<sup>47</sup> Jim Rankin, “GTA domestic violence groups brace for ‘perfect storm’ as abused women stay home amid COVID-19,” The Star, 24 March 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/03/24/gta-domestic-violence-groups-brace-for-perfect-storm-as-abused-women-stay-home-amid-covid-19.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Aidan Macnab, “Domestic violence surging amid COVID-19 pandemic,” Canadian Lawyer Magazine, 9 April 2020, <https://www.canadianlawyermag.com/practice-areas/family/domestic-violence-surg-ing-amid-covid-19-pandemic/328530>.

<sup>49</sup> OCJ, “COVID-19: Scheduling of family matters in the Ontario Court of Justice,” Ontario Court of Justice, 7 May 2020, <https://www.ontariocourts.ca/ocj/covid-19/covid-19-family-matters/>.

<sup>50</sup> Lori Thompson, “Island not exempt from increase in domestic violence during COVID-19 pandemic,” Manitoulin Expositor, 27 May 2020, <https://www.manitoulin.ca/island-not-exempt-from-increase-in-domestic-violence-during-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Clairmont, “Hamilton shelters bracing for surge in women, children fleeing abuse when COVID-19 ends,” Hamilton Spectator, 6 May 2020, <https://www.simcoe.com/opinion-story/9970650-hamilton-shelters-bracing-for-surge-in-women-children-fleeing-abuse-when-covid-19-ends/>.

Provinces and territories, which have jurisdiction over healthcare, have affirmed that sexual and reproductive health services are essential.<sup>52</sup> However, pre-pandemic access to sexual and reproductive health services was limited, particularly in rural and northern communities, and for marginalized groups.<sup>53</sup> Access during the pandemic has been further reduced.

Sexual health providers have prioritized access to abortion. Sexual health clinics in Canada have not closed, but many have had to cancel in-person services, opting for remote delivery except for urgent appointments.<sup>54</sup> The National Abortion Federation reported that some hospitals had reduced or halted abortion services.<sup>55</sup> Fear of visiting a medical facility and lack of finances to travel to appointments are barriers to accessing services.<sup>56</sup>

Some hospitals or clinics have reduced operating room time for abortions or reduced the number of clients.<sup>57</sup> Abortion providers who were asked to send their personal protective equipment supplies to be used in the pandemic response had to scale back service provision because of a lack of personal protective equipment.<sup>58</sup> For some pregnant people, the closest abortion clinic to offer the services they need may be in another province, or even in the United States, which they may not be able to access because of inter-provincial travel restrictions and the ban on all non-essential travel to the United States.<sup>59</sup>

Some public health officials have recommended medical over surgical abortions, where possible, to increase access to abortion during the pandemic.<sup>60</sup> The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada released guidelines on how to expand access to abortion through virtual assessments with physicians, and where possible, by couriering supplies to a pregnant person to allow for medical abortion using the medication Mifegymiso at home, accompanied with online resources, 24 hour call lines, and follow-up communications.<sup>61</sup>

Access to contraceptives has been reduced during the pandemic as people have less access to family doctors or sexual health clinics and in some cases the supply of contraceptives has been limited. Sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing has drastically decreased and lab capacity for STI testing has been severely reduced. This is particularly problematic because prior to the pandemic, several provinces and territories reported STI outbreaks.<sup>62</sup> The Canadian Pharmacists Association states that many pharmacies had to ration medication including birth control to one-month supplies to avoid shortages.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, there are concerns regarding the financial barriers to accessing contraception, particularly for people who

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<sup>52</sup>Rachel Gilmore, "Abortion access will be maintained across Canada amid COVID-19 outbreak," CTV, 26 March 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/abortion-access-will-be-maintained-across-canada-amid-covid-19-outbreak-1.4870129>.

<sup>53</sup>"Access at a glance: Abortion services in Canada," Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, August 2019, <https://www.actioncanadashr.org/resources/factsheets-guidelines/2019-09-19-access-glance-abortion-services-canada>.

<sup>54</sup> Laura Osman, "Advocates sound alarm over COVID-19 limiting access to contraceptives, abortion," The Globe and Mail, 2 April 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-advocates-sound-alarm-over-covid-19-limiting-access-to-contraceptives/>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> The Canadian Press, "Pandemic may lead women to neglect their reproductive health care," CBC, 5 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/coronavirus-covid-pandemic-reproductive-health-women-1.5556619>

<sup>57</sup> Haniya Khan, Martha Smith & Michael Chaikof, "COVID-19 Women's Initiative", Women's College Hospital, 6 May 2020, <https://www.womenscolleghospital.ca/news-and-publications/connect/may-5,-2020/covid-19-women-s-initiative>.

<sup>58</sup> Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights, "Letter to Minister of Health on Sexual and Reproductive Rights during COVID-19", 26 March 2020, <https://www.actioncanadashr.org/news/2020-03-26-letter-minister-health-sexual-and-reproductive-rights-during-covid-19>.

<sup>59</sup> Laura Osman, "Advocates sound alarm over COVID-19 limiting access to contraceptives, abortion," The Globe and Mail, 2 April 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-advocates-sound-alarm-over-covid-19-limiting-access-to-contraceptives/>.

<sup>60</sup> Rachel Gilmore, "Canada experiencing shortage of abortion pill amid COVID-19 pandemic," CTV, 30 March 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/canada-experiencing-shortage-of-abortion-pill-amid-covid-19-outbreak-1.4874666>.

<sup>61</sup> Haniya Khan, Martha Smith & Michael Chaikof, "COVID-19 Women's Initiative," Women's College Hospital, 6 May 2020, <https://www.womenscolleghospital.ca/news-and-publications/connect/may-5,-2020/covid-19-women%E2%80%99s-initiative>

<sup>62</sup> Laura Osman, "Advocates sound alarm over COVID-19 limiting access to contraceptives, abortion," The Globe and Mail, 2 April 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-advocates-sound-alarm-over-covid-19-limiting-access-to-contraceptives/>.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

have lost their jobs during the pandemic and no longer have prescription drug coverage through their employer.<sup>64</sup>

Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights operates a toll-free hotline to help people identify which sexual and reproductive health services are operating in their area.<sup>65</sup> In the last two weeks of March, they reported a 30% increase in calls to the helpline.<sup>66</sup> Many sexual health services have moved online, with some initial consultations and prescription refills done by video conference.<sup>67</sup> If in-clinic care is required, safety precautions are taken (e.g. COVID-19 screening by phone).<sup>68</sup>

Medical professionals often screen patients for intimate partner violence. With fewer people visiting hospitals and clinics because of fears they will contract COVID-19,<sup>69</sup> the Canadian Medical Association has highlighted the importance of medical professionals asking patients about intimate partner violence—both at in person and during virtual appointments—and referring victims to local resources.<sup>70</sup>

A survey conducted by Egale raises concerns that the pandemic has led to disproportionately high impacts on mental and physical well-being of LGBTI compared to non-LGBTI people. LGBTI people, and in particular transgender people, faced barriers to accessing healthcare before the pandemic; these barriers are exacerbated by reductions in healthcare services during the pandemic.<sup>71</sup> Assisted reproduction services such as in vitro fertilization, which many LGBTI people need to conceive a child, were not deemed an essential service.<sup>72</sup>

## 9. OBSTACLES TO PREVENTING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

***Please provide examples of obstacles encountered to prevent and combat domestic violence during the COVID-19 lockdowns.***

At the start of pandemic lockdowns, blanket messaging to stay at home meant that as domestic violence rates were rising, victims did not necessarily know they could leave home, and did not know whether shelters were open. After advocacy from women's organizations, governments publicly recognized that

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<sup>64</sup> The Canadian Press, "Pandemic may lead women to neglect their reproductive health care," CBC, 5 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/coronavirus-covid-pandemic-reproductive-health-women-1.5556619>.

<sup>65</sup> "Find Sexual Health Services Near You," Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, <https://www.actioncanadashr.org/resources/services>.

<sup>66</sup> Michelle Cohen, "Why the abortion pill is more important than ever during the coronavirus," Macleans, 29 April 2020, <https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/why-the-abortion-pill-is-more-important-than-ever-during-the-coronavirus/>.

<sup>67</sup> Melissa Couto, "Women shouldn't risk putting off sexual health care during pandemic, experts say," CTV, 5 May 2020, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/women-shouldn-t-risk-putting-off-sexual-health-care-during-pandemic-experts-say-1.4925093>.

<sup>68</sup> "Covid-19 Update", Options for Sexual Health, 27 May 2020, <https://www.optionsforsexualhealth.org/covid-19-update/>.

<sup>69</sup> The Canadian Press, "Pandemic may lead women to neglect their reproductive health care," CBC, 5 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/coronavirus-covid-pandemic-reproductive-health-women-1.5556619>.

<sup>70</sup> Nori Bradley et al., "Healthcare practitioners' responsibility to address intimate partner violence related to the COVID-19 pandemic," CMAJ, 1 June 2020, <https://www.cma.ca/content/192/22/E609>.

<sup>71</sup> Al Donato, "Health-care access was already hard for Trans Canadians. Then Covid-19 came," HuffPost, 26 March 2020,

[https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/covid19-trans-canadians\\_ca\\_5e7b896fc5b6b7d80959c06a?gucounter=1&guc\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNhLw&guc\\_e\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAABSOAFMBrdZWN3rzKxcyDVtJRBsMt0IbanuQqiku7ybXJwRMcee7UJm1QVQtd6KYVigpX5VBePikrbnJtMX-A0IkOzPJma-UwT4iu9jMcpc5ok2Vi7pH7sqFMAA70aNPuohbWRknuZ0wexLdj85apW2SdO5ssUDQ43UU0woJwOQ](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/covid19-trans-canadians_ca_5e7b896fc5b6b7d80959c06a?gucounter=1&guc_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNhLw&guc_e_referrer_sig=AQAAABSOAFMBrdZWN3rzKxcyDVtJRBsMt0IbanuQqiku7ybXJwRMcee7UJm1QVQtd6KYVigpX5VBePikrbnJtMX-A0IkOzPJma-UwT4iu9jMcpc5ok2Vi7pH7sqFMAA70aNPuohbWRknuZ0wexLdj85apW2SdO5ssUDQ43UU0woJwOQ).

<sup>72</sup> Hallie Cotnam, "COVID-19 costing IVF patients precious time," CBC, 15 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/ivf-patients-precious-time-covid-1.5569210>.

home is not a safe space for everyone. Some organizations remain concerned that while their services continue to operate, not all women are aware they are open.<sup>73</sup> Organizations working with women, transgender, and non-binary people who have experienced violence have been chronically under-funded. The federal government announced a one-time increase in funding for women's shelters and crisis centres, recognizing the increasing need for their services.<sup>74</sup> However, funding is still far less than what is needed to ensure that all women, transgender, and non-binary are able to live in safety and dignity, free from violence.

Women, transgender, and non-binary people isolating with an abusive partner may be under constant surveillance, making it difficult to access supports. Interval House Toronto reported that many people called the centre but were unable to call again because of a lack of privacy. Organizations have addressed this issue through initiatives such as creating 24 hour text and web chatting services.<sup>75</sup> Even as organizations make their services more accessible to victims sheltering with their abuser, cell phone and computer surveillance by abusers still limits communication.<sup>76</sup> Innovative initiatives include helping victims remove stalkerware from electronic devices, or providing new phones, so they can safely communicate.<sup>77</sup>

For women, transgender, and non-binary people living in rural communities, a lack of local shelter spaces, and lack of access to transportation to the nearest shelter, is a barrier to leaving an abusive partner.<sup>78</sup> Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada stated that Inuk women face barriers to leaving violent situations due to lack of housing, and the challenges of leaving a fly-in community.<sup>79</sup>

## 10. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES BY GOVERNMENTS

***Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by Governments.***

The government of Canada announced a one-time increase in funding to support funding to women's shelters and crisis centres.<sup>80</sup> While the funding was welcome and much needed, more support is needed to keep pace with the demand for services.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> "Groups report increase in calls from victims of domestic violence in northeastern Ontario," CBC, 27 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/domestic-violence-reports-covid-1.5586890>.

<sup>74</sup> David Lao, "Coronavirus: Trudeau announces \$40M for women's shelters, \$10M for Indigenous women and kids," Global News, 4 April 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6778731/coronavirus-womens-indigenous-assault-centres/>.

<sup>75</sup> Rochelle Baker, "COVID-19 compounds isolation of rural women facing violence," National Observer, 22 April 2020, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/04/22/news/covid-19-compounds-isolation-rural-women-facing-violence>.

<sup>76</sup> Adam Molnar & Christopher Parsons, "Stalkerware puts those living with abusers in even greater jeopardy during COVID-19 isolation," CBC, 18 May 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/opinion/opinion-stalkerware-abuse-covid-isolation-phones-1.5556379>.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Rochelle Baker, "COVID-19 compounds isolation of rural women facing violence," National Observer, 22 April 2020, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/04/22/news/covid-19-compounds-isolation-rural-women-facing-violence>.

<sup>79</sup> Samantha Allen, "Pandemic makes delayed MMIWG action plan more urgent, says Senators, advocates," The Hill Times, 3 June 2020, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/06/03/pandemic-makes-mmiwg-delayed-action-plan-more-urgent-say-senators-advocates/250822>.

<sup>80</sup> David Lao, "Coronavirus: Trudeau announces \$40M for women's shelters, \$10M for Indigenous women and kids," Global News, 4 April 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6778731/coronavirus-womens-indigenous-assault-centres/>.

<sup>81</sup> Victoria Gibson, "Domestic violence organizations laud new funding, but call for more supports as COVID-19 escalates risk," iPolitics, 16 April 2020, <https://ipolitics.ca/2020/04/16/domestic-violence-organizations-laud-new-funding-but-call-for-more-supports-as-covid-19-escalates-risk/>.

Inadequate funding continues to be a threat to the provision of essential services to women, transgender, and non-binary people in Canada. A report by the Canadian Women’s Foundation indicates that irregular and unpredictable funding many organizations are receiving through donations, corporate gifts, and government grants left organizations vastly under-resourced even prior to the pandemic.<sup>82</sup> In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, financial donations to civil society organizations are expected to further decrease, and organizations have had to cancel in-person fundraising events. Stable, increased, long-term funding is essential to ensure that service providers have the resources needed to support women, transgender, and non-binary people experiencing violence.<sup>83</sup>

# 11. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES BY CIVIL SOCIETY

*Please provide examples of good practices to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence and to combat other gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by NGOs and NHRIs or equality bodies.*

Women’s organizations are chronically underfunded, forcing them to be nimble, adaptable, and creative to meet the overwhelming needs of the communities they serve. In the early weeks of lockdowns in Canada, women’s organizations quickly sounded the alarm bell to governments that home was not a safe space for many, that rates of gender-based violence were likely to rise, and that increased funding was urgently needed to meet the needs of survivors.

Many organizations quickly pivoted their programming to include virtual service delivery including meeting with support workers via Skype or phone.<sup>84</sup> For example, Luke’s Place in Oshawa, Ontario, offers a virtual legal clinic for women experiencing domestic violence.<sup>85</sup> Victims of domestic violence can continue to receive support from Family Court support workers over the phone.<sup>86</sup> Where phone or Skype calls may not be possible due to proximity with the abuser, organizations are seeking to make alternative arrangements including email and 24 hour text chat services.<sup>87</sup> Luke’s place also provides information on how to delete messages, records of phone calls or browser histories.<sup>88</sup> The Ending Violence Association of BC is seeking to secure hundreds of mobile phones to send to clients so they will have a phone their abuser does not

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<sup>82</sup> Canadian Women’s Foundation, “Resetting Normal: Funding a Thriving Women’s Sector,” 2020 May, <https://canadianwomen.org/resetting-normal/>.

<sup>83</sup> Wendy Gillis, “Violence ‘is actually on the rise’ and prevention should be part of Canada’s COVID-19 recovery plan, ombudsman for victims of crime warns,” The Star, 22 May 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/05/22/canadas-covid-19-recovery-plan-must-include-domestic-violence-prevention-strategy-federal-ombud-for-victims-of-crime.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Perlita Stroh, “COVID-19 isolation measures increase risk for those in abusive relationships,” CBC, 29 March 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/covid-isolation-risks-abusive-relationships-1.5510551>.

<sup>85</sup> Wendy Gillis, “Forced to stay home with their abusers, Canadian victims of domestic violence must “choose between two pandemics,” The Star, 20 April 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/04/20/forced-to-stay-home-with-their-abusers-canadian-victims-of-domestic-violence-must-choose-between-two-pandemics.html>.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Rochelle Baker, “COVID-19 compounds isolation of rural women facing violence,” National Observer, 22 April 2020, <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2020/04/22/news/covid-19-compounds-isolation-rural-women-facing-violence>.

<sup>88</sup> Wendy Gillis, “Forced to stay home with their abusers, Canadian victims of domestic violence must “choose between two pandemics,” The Star, 20 April 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/04/20/forced-to-stay-home-with-their-abusers-canadian-victims-of-domestic-violence-must-choose-between-two-pandemics.html>.

control.<sup>89</sup> Rogers (a telecommunications company) announced a partnership with women’s shelters across Canada to provide free mobile devices and phone plans for six months.<sup>90</sup>

Online platforms are being used to help women discreetly seek help when they are isolated and sharing space with an abuser. The Canadian Women’s Foundation released an online campaign called Signal for Help, allowing women experiencing violence to make a specific hand signal while on a video call to indicate they need help. The Canadian Women’s Foundation notes there is a risk the abuser would also be aware of the online initiative, and such campaigns may not always provide support for women experiencing violence.<sup>91</sup>

## 12. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

***Please send any additional information on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic violence against women not covered by the questions above.***

The government of Canada delayed the release of its National Action Plan to implement the Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which it had promised would be released on 3 June, one year after the Inquiry’s final report was released. The government blamed the delay in part on COVID-19 and did not provide an updated timeline or process for creating the plan. Some advocates were concerned that the government had not contacted them to co-create the National Action Plan many months before the pandemic began, and feel the pandemic was an excuse for inaction.<sup>92</sup>

The Native Women’s Association of Canada stated that the pandemic and the crisis of violence are inseparable and that the action plan was so badly needed because of the pandemic.<sup>93</sup> Indigenous women are two and a half times more likely to experience spousal violence than non-Indigenous women.<sup>94</sup> During the pandemic, the number of Indigenous women facing violence has increased.<sup>95</sup>

During the pandemic the federal government has announced increased funding for Indigenous services, including \$44 million over five years to build 12 new shelters, however, no funding was made available to build new shelters for Inuit women.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Roshini Nair, “Domestic violence organizations prepare for possible surge due to COVID-19 isolation,” CBC 28 April 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/family-violence-bc-1.5547385>.

<sup>90</sup> “Connectivity a critical digital lifeline for women in crisis as domestic abuse rates increase during COVID-19,” GlobeNewswire, 19 May 2020, <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2020/05/19/2035775/0/en/Connectivity-a-critical-digital-lifeline-for-women-in-crisis-as-domestic-abuse-rates-increase-during-COVID-19.html>.

<sup>91</sup> “Signal for Help,” Canadian Women’s Foundation, <https://canadianwomen.org/signal-for-help/>.

<sup>92</sup> Shelby Lisk, “How government inaction on MMIWG could harm Indigenous women,” TVO, 3 June 2020, <https://www.tvo.org/article/how-government-inaction-on-mmiwg-could-harm-indigenous-women>.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> “Ontario taking action to better protect Indigenous women,” Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 1 June 2020, [https://news.ontario.ca/mcys/en/2020/06/ontario-taking-action-to-better-protect-indigenous-women.html?utm\\_source=ondemand&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=m](https://news.ontario.ca/mcys/en/2020/06/ontario-taking-action-to-better-protect-indigenous-women.html?utm_source=ondemand&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=m).

<sup>95</sup> “Violence against Indigenous women during COVID-19 sparks calls for MMIWG plan,” Native Women’s Association of Canada, 12 May 2020, <https://www.nwac.ca/violence-against-indigenous-women-during-covid-19-sparks-calls-for-mmiwg-plan/>.

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**CANADA**

## SUBMISSION TO THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ON COVID-19 AND THE INCREASE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Amnesty International submits this briefing to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović, in response to her request to receive all relevant information on the increase of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic from civil society, States, National Human Rights Institutions, international organisations, academia and other stakeholders.