



Information Bulletin

Knowledge - Creating Awareness for Safe Communities

Sexual & Gender Based Violence

Everyone has the right to live a life free from violence. Unfortunately, many face violence every day because of their gender expression, gender identity or perceived gender.

According to the United Nations, *sexual and gender-based violence refers to any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships. It encompasses threats of violence and coercion.* It inflicts harm on women, girls, men and boys.

Those who commit sexual violence can be any gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. According to Statistics Canada, the common characteristic is that men are the vast majority of perpetrators.

Sexual and gender-based violence includes any act of violence or abuse that can result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering. Examples of forms of violence and abuse include:

- physical violence;
- sexual violence (including child sexual abuse, sexual harassment and sexual exploitation);
- emotional and psychological violence (including threats and intimidation);
- harassment;
- online violence/technology-facilitated violence;
- financial abuse; and
- structural/systemic violence.

Experiencing violence can have devastating health and social impacts on the lives of individuals, families, communities and society as a whole.

Difference between sex and gender?

- **Sex:** refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define males, females and intersex persons.
- **Gender:** refers to the roles and behaviours that society associates with being female or male. Rigid gender norms can result in stereotyping and curb our expectations of both women and men. A society's understanding of gender changes over time and varies from culture to culture.

Impact of Violence

Violence can have lifelong impacts on one's physical and mental health.

- Chronic physical or mental illness
- Depression and anxiety
- Substance use
- Unintended pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Social isolation

Who is at Risk

The risk of violence varies across populations, with some more likely than others to be exposed to or experience violence. Some face unique barriers and challenges that put them at greater risk. For example:

- When all other risk factors are taken into account; women have a 20% higher risk of violent victimization than men.
- Young women aged 15-34 years of age face the highest risk of experiencing violence.
- Indigenous women were more than three times as likely to report being a victim of spousal violence.
- Women living with physical and cognitive impairments experience violence two to three times more often than women living without impairments.
- People self-identifying as homosexual or bisexual are three times more likely than heterosexuals to be victims of violence.
- Transgender people are almost twice as likely to report ever experiencing intimate partner violence.
- 59% of senior victims of family violence were women, with a rate 24% higher than that of men.
- Remote and isolated communities face particular challenges related to access and availability of appropriate supports.



Information Bulletin

Sexual & Gender Based Violence

Safety Planning

For many who have been affected by violence in relationships their current and long-term safety maybe at risk. Safety planning is about brainstorming ways to stay safe that may also help reduce the risk of future harm. It can include planning for unexpected crisis, considering options, and making decisions about next steps. Every situation is unique and one size fits all” models are not effective for ensuring safety.

Safety strategies should be reviewed/updated periodically to ensure they reflect the risks of the current circumstances. All plans should include calling 9-1-1 when you feel you are in immediate danger.

Safety planning when someone is causing harm:

- **Become familiar with safe places:** Identify safe places around you such as a local domestic violence shelter or a family member’s home.
- **Create a code word:** It might be a code between you and your children that means “get out,” or with your support network that means “I need help.”
- **Keep computer safety in mind:** Always log out of any profiles before leaving the computer. Never share passwords. Learn how to clear your browsing history and cookies. Use a different computer at a friend’s house or a public library when seeking support services.
- **Create a support network:** Having someone you can reach out to for support can be an important part of staying safe and recovering.
- **Prepare an excuse:** Create several plausible reasons for leaving the house at different times or for existing situations when things escalate or become dangerous.
- **Stay safe at home:** If you live with an abuser, be aware of changes in mood swings and behaviour. When an argument erupts move to a safe room or place. Avoid the bathroom, kitchen and garage where there are many potential weapons. Try to be in a room with outside access like windows and doors. If you are protecting yourself from someone who does not live with you, keep all the doors locked when you’re not using them. Install an outside lighting system with motion detectors. Change the locks if necessary.
- **Stay safe at work or in public places:** Inform your supervisor of the situation. See their support to implement strategies to ensure your safety. Be aware of your surroundings when in public or in open spaces. Identify where to go for help.

Safety planning for when being stalked:

- **Be prepared to reach out:** If possible, keep your cell phone charged and have emergency contact numbers programmed ahead of time. Memorize important numbers in case you do not have cell phone access.
- **Change your routine:** Be aware of your daily routine, where possible alter it over time to avoid predictability. Alternate your methods communication and transportation. Take different routes or different modes of transportation.
- **Tell someone you trust:** Stalking should not be kept a secret. Tell loved ones, parents or other trusted adults. Contact the local police to report any incidents.

Safety planning for when leaving a dangerous environment or situation:

- **Create a “grab & go bag:** Pack a bag that includes all important papers and documents, such as birth certificate, license, passport, social insurance card, immigration or work permit documents, copies of custody/protection orders, prescription drugs, and medical records. Include cash, keys, credit cards, and an extra set of clothing. Keep the bag an easy access but discreet place. If escaping with children, include their identifying information as well. If it is discovered, call it an “emergency preparedness grab-and-go bag.”
- **Plan a destination:** If you are not going to stay with someone you know, locate the nearest domestic violence shelter or homeless shelter. Know how to get to there. If you are driving, have a tank of gas filled at all times. If you rely on public transportation, know the routes departure times and cost of fares.
- **Prepare your support network:** Keep your support network updated. Instruct them not to disclose your whereabouts if the abuser is asking. Stop all contact with those who are associated with the abuser.
- **Computer safety:** If you have left the abusive relationship, do not use any form of social media (Facebook, Twitter). Close any social media and e-shopping accounts. Turn off location services/GPS on mobile devices, tablets or laptops, to ensure whereabouts cannot be tracked. When creating a new email identity make your email names anonymous, so that you are not easily identified. Only give out your new email address to trusted contacts. Change all passwords. Get a new unlisted number as well keep your old one for ongoing communication with your network. Do not give out your new number.

Sexual & Gender Based Violence

Warning Signs of Abuse - Intimate Partner Relationships

Abuser:

- Insults or puts down the other partner
- Does all the talking and dominates the conversation
- Seems overly possessive or controlling of the other (e.g., always checking up, disapproving of the other's friendships)
- Accuses the other of bad behaviour (e.g., flirting or talking too loudly)
- Suggest they are the victim in the relationship and acts depressed
- Lies to make themselves look good or exaggerates their good qualities
- Acts superior and of more value than the other partner

Victim:

- Is apologetic, makes excuses for their partner's behaviour or becomes aggressive and angry
- Appears fearful, nervous, unsure or passive when the other is present
- Appears to take the blame for everything that goes wrong
- Has frequent bruises or injuries, along with elaborate explanations for the injuries
- Is often absent from work due to illness sick
- Makes excuses at the last minute about why s/he can't meet you or tries to avoid you on the street
- Seems sad, lonely, withdrawn and fearful
- Increase in drugs or alcohol to cope

Warning Signs of Abuse - Child Abuse

- Unexplained bruises, cuts, burns, scars, sprains or broken bones
- Frequent "accidents" with questionable explanations
- Major changes in behaviour, including aggression or withdrawal
- Exposure to other violence within the family (e.g., between parents)
- Fearful of adults, the child may cringe or flinch if touched unexpectedly
- Fear of a specific adult, including a family member
- Running away from home and not wanting to return
- Repeatedly sick
- Sudden weight loss or weight gain
- Increased social problems at school
- Unusual knowledge of sexual behaviour for the child's age
- Inappropriate sexual behaviour, including play with toys, self or others, or displaying explicit sexual acts
- Physical signs of sexual abuse, including difficulty walking or sitting
- Self-abuse

Legal Duty to Report: If you suspect a child or youth under the age of 19 is being abused or neglected, there is a legal duty for citizens to report concerns to a child welfare worker, 1-800-663-9122 any time of the day or night.

Warning Signs of Abuse - Youth and Young Adults

It is never easy to come forward with a complaint. Research has found that most sexual assaults are committed by someone know or close to the victim. Rarely a stranger is implicated. For youth and young adults, this can make it very difficult for someone to come forward about sexual abuse/assault, particularly if the perpetrator is a family member or friend who is well liked by other peers.

Warning signs may be difficult to determine in youth and young adults as they can blend in with the everyday challenges youth encounter as they learn how to relate to their bodies, peers, and environments.

If something doesn't seem right, trust your instincts. It's better to ask and be wrong than to let a friend or loved one struggle with the effects of sexual assault. Remind people who come to you they will be believed. It is also important to confirm the incident is not their fault.

Some warning signs that may indicate an individual has been sexually assaulted include:

- Unusual weight gain or weight loss, unhealthy eating patterns, like a loss of appetite or excessive eating
- Signs of physical abuse, such as bruises
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Signs of depression, withdrawing from normal activities, or feeling "down." Low self-esteem
- Anxiety or avoidance of situations/places that did not cause anxiety in the past.
- Self-harming behavior, thoughts of suicide, or suicidal behaviors
- Changes in self-care, such as paying less attention to hygiene, appearance, or fashion than they usually do
- Turning to drugs or alcohol to cope
- Falling grades or withdrawing from classes



Information Bulletin

Sexual & Gender Based Violence

Changing the Story through Bystander Intervention

Anyone who witness words or actions that are disrespectful, abusive or harmful to someone, or if you suspect someone is being abused has a variety of ways to respond. It is important to remember that situations involving violent people can escalate and become unsafe. Exercise caution and avoid putting yourself in harm's way.

- **Call 9-1-1 or the police:** If you feel that you or someone close to you is in immediate danger
- **Report child abuse:** If there is any reason to suspect a child is or has been abused, we as the public have a duty and are required by law to report. Call 9-1-1, the police or child welfare services in B.C. 1-800-663-9122.
- **Offer your assistance:** If you see someone being harassed or abused, simply showing the person s/he is not alone may help. Asking "are you okay?" or "is there any way I can help?" may take the power away from the perpetrator. If you feel that such an intervention will put you at risk, you should call 911 or the police.
- **Walk away or refuse to join in:** When someone treats another in a derogatory manner, you may walk away or refuse to join in. Ignoring or laughing at these kinds of comments not only implies you condone them, but may also encourage the perpetrators to continue. When you walk away from abusive behaviour, you show perpetrators that you don't agree and won't act as an audience.
- **Speak out:** Tell others that you do not condone derogatory, degrading, abusive and violent actions towards women and girls. Be direct about what you have seen
 - For example:
 - "I don't think that joke is funny." "That joke makes me uncomfortable."
 - "Leave her alone." "I don't like how you are treating her. Stop it."
 - "Your words/actions are uncalled for. What you are saying/doing is wrong."
 - "How would you feel if another person did this to your mother, grandmother, sister, wife or daughter?"

Resources:

VictimLink BC: Free and confidential services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in over 110 languages, providing crisis and referral information to victims of crime.
1-800-563-0808 or www.victimlinkbc.ca

Ministry of Public Safety & Solicitor General – Victims and Witnesses of Crime and Violence: A website that provides information to victims and witnesses of crime, violence, or abuse.
www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime

Ending Violence Association of BC - Be More Than a Bystander Campaign: Campaign to raise awareness of violence against women and respectful relationships.
www.endingviolence.org

Domestic Violence - It's Never OK: A website providing information and resources for those experiencing or wanting to assist a loved one who is experiencing domestic violence.
www.domesticviolencebc.ca

ShelterSafe: An online resource to assist women and their children connect to the nearest shelter or transition house that can offer safety, hope and support.
www.sheltersafe.ca

Hollaback: Provides resources and information to support communities develop innovative strategies to ensure equal access to public spaces and reduce street harassment.
www.ihollaback.org

References:

Content excerpted from the following websites:

- Status of Women Canada, End Violence: www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/violence/index-en.html
- Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, Victims of Crime: www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/justice/criminal-justice/victims-of-crime
- Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network: www.rainn.org

