

The Impact of COVID-19 on Domestic Violence

CALGARY IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

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With the global restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Canadian organizations have raised concerns about a resulting increase in domestic violence.

There is certainly cause for this concern in Alberta. As cases of COVID-19 surged, Edmonton police reported in November that domestic violence-related calls increased by 16% in 2020. This was attributed in part to the pandemic. In Calgary, the Calgary Police Service responded to 15,038 domestic incidents from January to September 2020, which was about 9% above average. Additionally, the Alberta Family Violence Info Line saw a 23% increase in calls and an 83% increase in the chat service from April to August in 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. Not only did the numbers increase, Calgary domestic violence service providers also observed that the danger and complexity of the violence had risen during the pandemic.

Research has shown that social isolation, loss of employment and reduced income are all factors known to increase the risk of domestic violence. Clearly, these conditions have been heightened in recent months. Also, the pandemic has led to increased stress, with lockdowns and families confined at home, the closure of schools and childcare facilities, and possible increased tension in the home. For those experiencing violence, especially within the home, accessing help may be more difficult because of restricted contact with formal and informal networks and sources of support.

A survey conducted by the Ending Violence Association of Canada and Anova confirms these concerns. Staff and volunteers of gender-based violence services consistently observed changes in the victim's experience of violence related to the tactics used to commit violence. In particular, service providers noted that victims were increasingly hearing about how abusers

were taking advantage of the conditions created by the pandemic to escalate control and isolation to commit violence. Some of these tactics are:

- Using isolation at home as a tool for engaging in violence
- Misusing information about the pandemic to exercise control
- Monitoring and controlling access to technology to increase isolation and limit help-seeking.

Some of the barriers that victims of domestic violence experience during COVID include:

- Fears about contracting COVID-19 by accessing shelter, hospital-based or other services
- Fears or unwillingness to follow COVID-19 protocols that can be triggering or reminiscent of controlling and abusive situations
- Inability to participate in a telephone or virtual supports due to lack of technology or internet access, lack of privacy or space to use the phone or computer, and/or discomfort with receiving services usually provided face-to-face over telephone or video
- Preoccupation with other stressors and meeting basic needs
- Lack of availability or space, especially for women in shelters where the numbers of clients were limited due to pandemic protocols
- Prevented by the abusive partners from seeking or accessing services

Staff working in immigration and settlement services and other programming that provides services to non-status, immigrant, refugee, and newcomer women spoke about some of the additional barriers created by the pandemic protocols:

“In newcomer communities, using computer/ online platforms device skill is low, and language is one of the barriers. It means virtual connections need more time and educational experiences.”

“Huge implications for clients who in the process of obtaining status, with the courts/ Immigration Board still closed, this limits these victims from financial means of moving forward with their life, such as receiving Child Tax, completing their Taxes, applying for social assistance, accommodation and job searching etc. Also, trying to receive supports for their children, childcare, special needs supports etc.”

“The pandemic created additional challenges for offering cultural supports to survivors.”

(above quotes taken from <http://www.anovafuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Full-Report.pdf>)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that one in three women experience violence during their lifetimes. Many of these women are now trapped at home with their abusers and are at increased risk of other forms of violence as overloaded service providers, healthcare systems and disrupted justice services struggle to respond. Employers who have immigrant and newcomer employees are encouraged to consider the impact COVID-19 or any other pandemic may have on their employees experiencing domestic violence and support them in every way possible.

References:

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Calgary Immigrant Women's Association

#200, 138 4th Ave SE Calgary, Alberta T2G 4Z6 | www.ciwa-online.com

PHONE 403-263-4414 | **FAX** 403-264-3914 | **E-MAIL** familyservices@ciwa-online.com