

CANADA >>> Improving data on gender-based violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) is pervasive: data show that roughly 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) and/or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. According to self-reported perceptions of public safety one in three women did not feel safe walking at night in 2022.

While many countries have been able to produce a national prevalence rate, few have been able to translate it into more nuanced and policy-led data collection. Canada has made a significant commitment to collect data to inform evidence-based action, showing that technical obstacles to data feminism can be overcome with political will and targeted funding.

Advocating for GBV to be a national priority

The Canadian government's focus on GBV was shaped by many years of lobbying and engagement by feminist actors, who had continually stressed the urgency of addressing GBV and the importance of better data to do so. Women's Shelters Canada (WSC), a GBV-focused coalition, had called for a National Action Plan (NAP) on GBV since 2013, drawing on UN guidelines, including the need for "regular collection and dissemination of comprehensive statistical data".

In 2017, Canada launched its first federal GBV strategy, and the Department for Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) was made an official department of the government in 2018. In 2021, WAGE commissioned the WSC to develop a roadmap for the NAP, with funding for the consultation process. The roadmap was developed in just three months by the WSC coalition, featuring 100 recommendations and a step-by-step guide for implementation. The government's 10-year NAP was published by WAGE in November 2022.

Prioritizing data

Canada's federal GBV strategy – and WAGE's subsequent plan – placed a significant emphasis on research and data collection, with a corresponding budget allocation of CAD 30.1 million over five years (14 per cent of the total). Investments in survey data were deemed critical to complement administrative data, given chronic underreporting of GBV and the need for data on forms of violence that do not meet criminal thresholds.



It all comes back to the feminist movements. That's why WAGE is a department, and that's why [it has] millions of dollars.

— Anonymous

WAGE collaborated with Statistics Canada to develop three population-based surveys: the 2018 Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces (SSPPS), the 2019 Survey of Individual Safety in the Postsecondary Student Population and the 2020 Survey of Sexual Misconduct at Work. While previous victimization surveys were limited to recent criminal acts, these surveys sought "to measure the entire continuum of gender-based violence, by including violent victimization experiences throughout peoples' lives, their experiences of unwanted sexual behaviours and online victimization".

The data collection aimed to address gaps in support for diverse populations, considering indigenous status, sexual and gender identity, residence in Northern, rural, and remote communities, disability, migration/refugee status and age. Requiring an initial outlay of CAD 17.1 million, the surveys filled important gaps, including the first-ever nationally representative data on transgender and gender-diverse people in Canada. Statistics Canada intends to repeat these surveys every five years.

Continued learning and collaboration between feminist civil society and government

WAGE has sought to ensure that experts, service providers and GBV survivors inform its activities, though feminist actors highlight that this is a gap at sub-national levels. Whilst celebrating the adoption of the GBV National Action Plan (NAP), feminist actors, including WSC, continue to play a vital role in highlighting challenges and calling for greater clarity in monitoring and accountability.



There are certain populations that are always going to be excluded from [the] surveys because of their living conditions or their language aptitude...from my perspective, that's why we really need to rely on qualitative study.

— Anonymous

Actors have highlighted that the use of households as a sampling frame, for example, has meant that surveys excluded individuals living in institutions, shelters, or other collective dwellings. WSC has stressed the need for additional forms of collection: "data that [go] beyond disaggregated numbers, [apply] an intersectional lens, and [are] collected in ways that are inclusive, honor lived realities, and go beyond the traditional, narrow, number-driven methodologies; that is, not just surveys".

Responding to these points, the Canadian government has been increasingly looking to fund qualitative research studies on GBV. Feminist actors have played a vital role in shaping the government's GBV prevention and response strategies, but this work is ongoing, with feminist actors currently pushing for regular engagement and action that is intersectional, trauma-informed and able to capture the nuance of the lived experience of gender-based violence in diverse populations.

Their continued role is crucial in both supporting and challenging the government to respond to the evolving needs of those affected by gender-based violence and to ensure advocacy and policy implementation intersect to effect meaningful change in addressing GBV.