



**A Report to Guide the Implementation of a National Action Plan on Violence
Against Women and Gender-Based Violence**

Executive Summary

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Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) is based in Ottawa, Ontario. Bringing together 14 provincial and territorial shelter organizations, we represent a strong, unified voice on the issue of violence against women on the national stage. Through collaboration, knowledge exchange, and adoption of innovative practices, we advance the coordination and implementation of high-quality services for women and children accessing VAW shelters and transition houses.

Women's Shelters Canada acknowledges that the location of our office and the work that we do in Ottawa is on the traditional, unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishnaabeg people.



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List of Abbreviations

BIPOC—Black, Indigenous, People of Colour
CEDAW—The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CERB—Canada Emergency Response Benefit
CIRNAC—Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada
CFOJA—Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability
CRB—Canada Recovery Benefit
CRIAW—The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women
CW—Child Welfare
COs—Concluding Observations
CSO—Civil Society Organization
FMG—Female Genital Mutilation
FPT—Federal, Provincial/Territorial (pertaining to jurisdictions of government)
GBA+—Gender-Based Analysis Plus
IC—Independent Commission
ICT—Information and Communications Technology
IRCC—Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
ILO—International Labour Organization
LGBTQI2S+ / 2SLGBTQIA+—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Two-Spirited, Intersex, Asexual
MEAL—Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
MMIWG—Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
NAP—National Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Gender-based Violence
NHS—National Housing Strategy
PHAC—Public Health Agency of Canada
SDG—Sustainable Development Goals (UN)
SOGIE—Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression
SRHR—Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights
STI—Sexually Transmitted Infection
TOR—Terms of Reference
UNDRIP—United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UFC—Unified Family Court
UPR—Universal Periodic Review
VACR—Violence Against Women Advocate Case Review
WG—Working Group
VAW/GBV—Violence Against Women/Gender-Based Violence
VT—Vicarious Trauma
WAGE—Women and Gender Equality
WSC—Women’s Shelters Canada

Note on Terminology

Throughout this report, we define violence against women (VAW) and gender-based violence (GBV) as inclusive of cis women, trans women, and people of all marginalized genders, including Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary people.

Executive Summary

Canada is at cross-roads when it comes to violence against women and gender-based violence (VAW/GBV): a perfect storm of colliding pandemics—COVID-19, and the pre-existing WHO declared pandemic of VAW/GBV¹—has created both the conditions for escalating harms of violence, and the aperture for real and lasting change. This report lays the groundwork for answering the question: What will real change require?

Women’s Shelters Canada (WSC) was funded by the federal department of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) to develop a strategic engagement process with anti-violence leaders across Canada to inform the development of a National Action Plan to End Violence against Women and Gender-Based Violence (NAP).

For the purposes of our work, the project adopted the United Nations’ broad definition of what constitutes VAW/GBV. Stemming from the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women,² adopted by the UN General Assembly, we considered violence to mean:

any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (Article 1, p.3).

Following global practice, we regard it as both a human rights and public health crisis of pandemic proportions.³

This report follows a significant period of research and development by WSC and its many partners, from first tabling the case for a NAP in 2013.⁴ In 2015, we issued a Call for a NAP and crafted a Blueprint.⁵ In 2020, we released a Reissued Call for a NAP⁶ that was endorsed by more than 250 organizations and entities.

On March 31, 2021, we submitted an Interim Report. In the main, the findings of that report are echoed in this Final Report. The primary distinction between the Interim Report and the Final Report is the level of detail we were able to explore in providing recommendations for whichever government ministries, entities, or network of advocates picks up this mantle next.

Both reports were generated using the same processes and methodologies. In this Final Report, some areas of our findings remain the same. Others have been elaborated in greater detail. Others still emerged and make a debut here.

Principally, both reports were organized around the four pillars of social policy focus that characterized the WAGE agreement for the project. These pillars and their scope and meaning are the result of an interplay between community’s call for action in these policy areas,⁷ and government’s shaping of those calls into succinct “pillars” of the plan’s outline (see Project

Background Material for Working Group Members, Appendix G). They are explored in greater detail in the full report that follows.

Notably, a fifth pillar, on Indigenous Women’s Leadership, was assigned to a process outside this project and rests with the WAGE Indigenous Women’s Circle. Given the shocking levels of violence against Indigenous women, our project was keen to make connections with both this fifth pillar of work and with the separate but related process of developing a national action plan in response to the findings of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG).⁸

The leadership of our project made considerable effort to coordinate our priorities with these two processes in the hope of ensuring a respectful amplification of their findings. It was our intention that the leadership of Indigenous women and Indigenous women’s organizations would shape the link between the separate processes so that they were harmonized in some way, ensuring that Indigenous women’s voices could be heard in all frameworks to address VAW/GBV. While we were able to schedule a single meeting with the MMIWG Commission,⁹ and our pillars had Indigenous women participating in the determination of the NAP recommendations you find herein—as well as starting from a template of recommendations that included the Calls for Justice¹⁰—a formal collaboration between the two initiatives was not possible in the time we had. This is an area of distinct and important work for the team that moves this report forward to structure the NAP.

We conducted additional extensive background research, including legal and document review, as well as interviews with NAP proponents in other jurisdictions, including the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia.

The four Working Groups (WGs)—with two co-chairs and eight members—are rooted in a variety of communities, identities, and geographic locations, organized around the four public policy pillars defined in the following manner:

- ***Enabling Environment and Social Infrastructure***

Broadly speaking, these will be social policy responses. The NAP must address all policy areas that may affect women’s vulnerability to violence and their ability to access services and protections. It must strive to achieve full substantive equality for all women to prevent and eventually end VAW/GBV.

- ***Prevention***

Prevention work must be community-specific, adequately funded, and based on a gendered, feminist intersectional analysis of violence. The focus has to be on educating children, youth, and adults on human rights and VAW/GBV. This must be done through promoting understanding of healthy relationships, consent and rape culture, breaking

down sexual assault myths, encouraging bystander interventions, offering programs to foster self-esteem, and working with men and boys to change attitudes and behaviours.

- ***Promotion of Responsive Legal and Justice Systems***

The NAP must address police, legal, court, and prison systems to ensure they reflect and are responsive to the lived realities of women facing violence. It must also work to both prevent and reduce the impacts of violence and ensure women's safety from an intersectional perspective.

- ***Support for Survivors and Their Families***

Broadly speaking, these will be service responses. Ideally, a universal, coordinated, and integrated system of support services must be adequately funded, offered across all geographic locations, and accessible to all women who have experienced any form of VAW/GBV. This should include the development and implementation of service and practice standards and guidelines for all sectors that respond to violence against women, such as health, child protection, social assistance, and housing, to name a few.

These are further elaborated in the Recommendations that follow.

Working with the existing compendium of 646 recommendations collected and shared with us by WAGE, each WG in the four pillars reviewed, sorted, analyzed, and did significant homework on the implications of the recommendations we supplied them.

What follows is divided from highest level overview, to a digestible narrative report in the main body of the document, to appendices that allow for an unsynthesized exploration of the narrative reports from the WGs for future use. As such, the report is presented in the following manner:

- The Executive Summary presents a snapshot of our work together over three months. This provides a brief narrative on some matters of general context and concern that frame the recommendations that immediately follow.
- We requested each working group to provide 20 recommendations, understanding that this prioritizing was both difficult and practical, allowing a manageable list of actions to enter public discourse in advance of the 10-year horizon's full map for a way forward. In the end, the recommendation table represents the priorities of the expert WGs and took us slightly over the 20 per pillar we had anticipated. In preparing this report, the writing team determined that collecting all the recommendations in one place for ease of future use was preferable to imposing the limit of 20 originally conceived.
- Speaking to the 10-year NAP horizon in particular, it is our intention that these pressure-tested recommendations—discussed and vetted by eight experts per pillar area—will provide an important basis for the 10-year planning horizon.

- Our project team also realized that each thematic area of public policy could present complexities for practical application, which the three months allotted to this project would not be sufficient to resolve. In a few cases, we were able to commission discussion papers to explore the matters to be considered and the next steps for the NAP framing and implementation process. To this end, Appendix E (Gender-Based Violence, Economic Security, and the Potential of Basic Income) and Appendix F (National Legislation on VAW/GBV) provide “deeper dives” on topics our WGs in the Infrastructure and Legal pillars felt needed elaboration.

Each pillar provided narrative justifications and explanations for their recommendations. These narrative accounts of each pillar’s role in the NAP, the benefits and pitfalls of the recommendations for change that have been fashioned by the WGs, and the hoped-for outcomes of the change that is called for, are critical context for the development of a full NAP and implementation process. These have been condensed and compiled into the text of the Executive Summary, at a high level, and in the main body of the report as introductions to the pillar-specific recommendations. The narrative reports prepared by each of the WGs appear in alphabetical sequence in Appendix C.

All of this material was vetted and submitted by the co-chairs of each pillar and based on the intensive work done with the 40 members of the WGs assembled between February and April 2021. They, together with WSC’s Executive Director and the team of researchers, writers, and the Strategic Engagement Specialist, represent approximately 1,000 person-years of VAW/GBV experience and knowledge. They also, crucially, deeply inform the Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) framework we are calling for as an integral aspect of the NAP.

Briefly stated, lessons learned via the United Nations (UN) on various countries’ experiences on implementing NAPs clearly point out that an early investment in MEAL is crucial to successful implementation. As noted in our findings—especially from our research into the case of Australia, where multiple and consecutive three-year NAPs have been implemented—the lack of a robust MEAL strategy in place from the beginning was identified as a major weakness.

Therefore, to ensure that evidence is generated to support effective implementation of a NAP that is transparent, accountable, and that takes an inclusive, intersectional, and rights-based approach, it is crucial to put in place an intersectional feminist MEAL strategy. In the narrative report, we present discussion on the importance of an intersectional feminist approach to MEAL for the NAP, and outcomes and considerations for measurements for the recommendations from each pillar. The work on VAW/GBV is dynamic and often engages the formal realm of law, policy, institutions, and resources, as well as patriarchal, racist, and other oppressive social structures, cultural beliefs, and practices that are held up as neutral and “givens.” A feminist approach to MEAL challenges us to think differently about what is considered evidence. It pushes the boundaries of how this evidence is gathered and questions who gives it meaning and relevance.

To that end, the report also includes a commissioned paper (Appendix D) that draws on evidence from peer-reviewed and grey literature, as well as reported lessons learned and international best practices on integrating MEAL into coordinated responses such as NAPs. This area of our work has been significantly deepened subsequent to the Interim Report. Four specific recommendations related to MEAL are related to funding, structure, composition, and methodology of the accountability process for the NAP over 10 years.

One aspect of strong congruence between the two reports, separated by only an additional month of work, is agreement that the Final Report is not the fulfillment of the state's obligation to implement a NAP. We continue to emphasize that the NAP requires sustained and escalating investment through budgets that prioritize women's lives; it requires structural support that will maintain focus through and beyond individual election cycles and government mandates; it will require the oversight and evaluation of grounded experts; and it will require an initial investment of dollars and political will to get at both root causes and urgent, life-threatening conditions. This is envisioned as part of a 10-year planning arc with substantial fiscal commitment and structures of guidance and accountability outside of government.

Without exception, all WGs identified that the recommendations we were furnished with required significant re-analysis and updating in light of the intersectional impacts of VAW/GBV. Placing ill-considered recommendations on this foundation without reconsideration would have potentially created greater harm than good. We therefore initiated this review and it is reflected in the recommendations found in this report.

While intersectionality is a term now used widely in activist circles, it has also come into government and social policy lexicons. It is therefore worth setting out the meaning to be inferred in this summary, as well as the full report.

[What is meant by an intersectional approach?](#)

The term intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American critical race feminist activist and legal scholar. The term in her writing was a metaphor for how discrimination works in real life:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions, and sometimes from all of them.¹¹

In this analogy, the accident is the human rights harm that is caused to an individual, and the intersections are all the different "grounds" or identities/situations that are forms of discrimination. Crenshaw's work began at the intersection of Black women and the separate protections for race and gender in labour law, which left their unique and compound forms of discrimination and experiences of violence unaccounted for and unremedied. Her work has since come to express the possibility of a nearly infinite entanglement of human experience as impacted by systems of governance and regulation. In an interview marking the 20th

anniversary of her first use of the term, Crenshaw had the following to say about the applicability of the term:

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.¹²

Most crucially, for the purposes of understanding our approach to the recommendations regarding a NAP, Crenshaw's vision of intersectionality is structural in nature, and thus not merely identity-based. As such, intersectionality "allows us to elaborate the specifically structural histories of exclusion from the distributional benefits of equality," and indeed "the distributional inequalities of feminism's successes" until now.¹³ That is, when deployed accurately to its birthright, intersectionality identifies pre-existing inequalities that challenge the claims of formal legal equality to have achieved its goal of "equality for all." As one of our WG members has aptly stated:

Given the inter-constitutive nature of multiple and distinct experiences of structural oppression and violence, we need to be alert to the 'interlocking systems of oppression'¹⁴ that occur. We thus would benefit from seeking deeper understandings of how these different systems of oppression interact, and to be careful of our assumptions in centring one experience of marginalization over another.¹⁵

While we use the word here with this meaning, throughout the public policy space its deployment needs to be better understood to pose and explore the question of whether its adoption effectively "moves intersectionality from critical social theory to critical social policy technique that advances the claims of the most marginalized."¹⁶

For the purposes of the work on the NAP policy pillars, intersectionality's origins in the human rights legal context, and its advancement as part of the international legal obligations of the Canadian state (explored further below), recede into the background. Its use with respect to recommendations for the NAP has less to do with the grounds of discrimination per se and more with the best way to avoid violation of the rights covered in law in the first place. In this sense, our WGs were seized with the understanding that discrimination is a social process, wherein "an individual's experience is unintelligible without the context of complex systemic and group disadvantage and exploitation."¹⁷

Nevertheless, intersectionality does harbinger legal obligations, which we have also explored. While we have undertaken the work of collating the intersections of harm to be addressed by the recommendations in circulation, and by bringing our expertise to imagining new paths forward for each pillar, work remains for those who follow and use this report to continue this crucial practical engagement.

In our narrative section in the main report tracing state obligations to human rights norms (see cross-cutting theme 3), we call on government first to fulfill its existing obligations, but also to advance Canada's participation in the global human rights compact, and to keep it in the leadership pack of human rights players on the world stage through the following recommendations:

- Make good on promises to ratify and implement the Treaty of Belém do Pará on VAW/GBV.
- Ratify the International Labour Organization Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment (ILO C-190).
- Invest in leadership of Indigenous women to meaningfully participate in discussions of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) to balance the discussions underway.

The WGs noted that intersectionality must not be merely scattered throughout public policy speak without careful attention to its implications. As one intersectionality scholar has emphasized:

Intersectionality's institutional incorporation ... requires attending to both continuities and breaches between the ways that intersectionality has been understood and practiced at different stages of its development in different national and institutional contexts.¹⁸

Principally, the WG members emphasized that the populations most affected by violence are those that are consequently most affected by our failure to reduce rates of violence through our interventions to date, including people living in rural and remote areas, Indigenous people, Black people, people with disabilities, racialized people, non-binary and trans people, LGBTQI2S+ people, and migrant people. Without adequate consideration of the ways in which violence is experienced differently, and to a greater extent by some people and populations, the recommendations in circulation may simply redistribute harms across social systems and populations.

We have initiated a re-examination of recommendations based on these criteria in the time allotted. What follows gives some direction for what is needed in the design and implementation of a truly intersectional NAP that is grounded in the current context.

We have tapped into the groundswell of support for reform of VAW/GBV response systems in light of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, ableism, transphobia, and the issues facing those in Canada's most violently affected and least served communities. This desire for re-examination and reform includes, perhaps most especially, a reconsideration of the role of policing in VAW/GBV response; for this too we have not had the investment of time necessary to establish the recommendations that would stage the change that is needed, although we

have tackled the issues through discussions of redistributive community investments and system-wide education and training.

Given the depth and extent of what could be accomplished over the 10 years of the NAP, we emphasize that we lacked the time to find agreement on whether we were building or dismantling in areas requiring substantial reform. Our report captures this unresolved dilemma with recommendations and narratives that attend to possibilities and the attendant intricacies as we see them.

Following from the intersectional lens we provided to the analyzed and vetted recommendations, we have identified numerous cross-cutting themes that did not neatly confine themselves to one pillar or another. The lives of those we intend the NAP to positively impact are multifaceted, and thus, so are the policy areas we organized ourselves into. The recommendations collide and intersect, and they influence and, at times, contradict or mutually support one another. Each pillar tackles these themes from a slightly different angle, based on the types of outcomes, activities, or processes that public policy requires. We indicate levels of government responsible for enacting the change required—making special note of their public commitments to the principles a specific recommendation fulfills—and we group measurable outcomes according to broad results. We additionally capture context, considerations, and nuances not yet resolved or not necessarily evident in the sheer statement of the recommendation itself.

Recognizing the richness in this, and the need to leave a legacy for the next phase of NAP development and implementation, we have not removed duplication in what follows. Instead, we have compiled these “overlaps” into thematic narratives with a summary of their origins and implications. This provides context for the detailed recommendations that appear at the end of this Executive Summary.

Overall, our work in this report should be seen as the beginning of a longer process. These are complex issues that require more thought and deliberation than our time allowed. Our hope is that the NAP will be used as a starting point for change and as a way to keep governments accountable into the future while also implementing urgent change. The Executive Summary, by definition, flies over the details that follow. To tap into the benefits of the work represented in this report, it should be read in its fullness.

This report and the work that informs it was undertaken in advance of the tabling of the 2021 Federal Budget.¹⁹ Our Interim Report was also filed in advance, with the intention of providing guidance for the budget process. We applaud the federal government for making VAW/GBV a central consideration in Budget 2021, which makes an overall investment of \$600 million in initiatives that anti-violence experts have been calling for as part of the NAP. This investment will need to be allocated strategically so that future budgets can meet the broad scope of change that curbing VAW/GBV requires.

Fourteen million dollars for establishing and implementing the NAP is a significant first step. Alongside our partners, Women's Shelters Canada looks forward to continuing to work closely with the federal government in the coming months to ensure the NAP gets off the ground with community-based, anti-violence expertise. Specifically, we want to ensure that this investment, in what the budget document terms a Secretariat, conforms to our expectation that framing, oversight, implementation, and accountability for the NAP remain in the hands of the experts who have the skills to guide it.

As we have said in our public responses to the budget, the future of the NAP will take billions, not millions.²⁰ Likewise, while we applaud Budget 2021 for making an overall \$400 million investment on data—primarily to Statistics Canada, to address various data gaps, especially around gender, racism, and unequal power relations, to improve on evidence-based decision-making—it is simply not enough. Investment towards better data over the next five years is only the first step. What is required, as voiced by the WGs, is better monitoring and accountability; data that goes beyond disaggregated numbers, applies an intersectional lens, and is collected in ways that are inclusive, honour lived realities, and go beyond the traditional, narrow, number-driven methodologies; that is, not just surveys, not just statistical analysis, and not just larger sampling.

We need ways to systematically ensure participation and collaboration from VAW/GBV survivors, gender-justice sector experts, and anti-VAW/GBV advocates—upholding the principle of “nothing about me, without me.” We must allow evidence generated that honours the narratives from Indigenous survivors, LGBTQI2S+ survivors, and from Black and racialized survivors of VAW/GBV—data gathering that centres on safety, healing, and justice. The core report and the commissioned paper on MEAL (Appendix D), contain more detailed descriptions of what it means to take an intersectional and feminist approach to monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning, including key recommendations that have emerged from our WGs, discussion on what counts as evidence, and who gives it meaning.

We note that the external limitations on this process—the short timeframe, the pandemic-imposed inability to gather in person, the limited number of recommendations each WG could bring forward to create a digestible and effective report—required us to provide largely broad-brush recommendations. We hope these will be seen as focused on long-term systemic change that will occur in increments, without ignoring those changes that require attention in the short-term. Our Recommendations Tables indicate the timeframes required where we were able to determine so.

What follows is a foundational contribution to the design and implementation of a 10-year NAP with leadership, increased and ongoing budgetary investment from the federal government, and collaboration and commitment from all other levels of government, according to existing platforms,²¹ mandates,²² commitments already made,²³ and the evident need to tackle this issue with all available means. Again, it will take billions, not millions to advance a truly coordinated and measurable impact on VAW/GBV.

In general, we have proposed long-term approaches with some short- to medium-term measures that would bring us closer to the desired outcomes. The overarching goal is to build resilient, sustainable systems that can withstand pressures from economic instability, shifts in government, or other factors.

We submit this report from the WSC Strategic Engagement Project to answer the call we made many years ago: to follow global best practice and create a National Action Plan to end VAW/GBV that can be held up as a global standard. We trust this report and its background research will inform this process moving forward.

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