



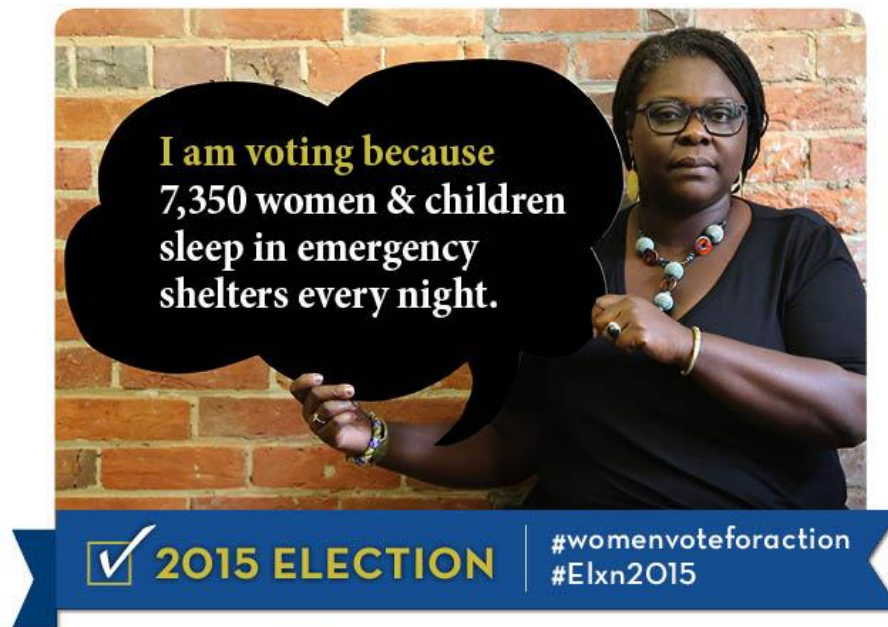
A TURNING POINT
FOR WOMEN



Working Together to End Violence Against Women

*YWCA Toronto Submission to Status of Women Canada
Federal Strategy Against Gender-Based Violence*

September, 2016



*Photo | Meme from YWCA Toronto's #womenvoteforaction federal election campaign

Working Together to End Violence Against Women

YWCA Toronto is the largest multi-service women's organization in the country. We have a long and proud history of providing direct services and tackling systemic issues to help women escape violence, move out of poverty, and access safe affordable housing. We also work with young girls - building their leadership and critical thinking skills. Our Association serves over 12,000 women and families annually in 32 programs in 12 locations across the City of Toronto.

Last year, YWCA Toronto provided over 1,700 women and children fleeing violence with vital resources. Our services include three women's shelters, micro-loans for women escaping violence and healing programs where women and children can recover from trauma. We also have 550 units of permanent housing. Many of the women in our housing programs have extremely low incomes, have experienced violence, or have mental health and addictions challenges. Safe, affordable housing is critically important in helping women rebuild their lives after violence. Our largest housing site, the YWCA Toronto Elm Centre, includes 50 units of housing for Indigenous women and their families. Ending violence against women is a priority for YWCA Toronto.

This submission is informed by the life experiences of the thousands of women and girls who use our programs and services every day. It also incorporates feedback from sixty-nine YWCA Toronto staff members (25% of our total team) who took the time to provide input. Many of our staff are front-line workers, many are advocates and activists, and all are dedicated to helping women find safety, support and justice.

Priorities for a Federal Strategy on Gender-Based Violence

While other levels of violence have decreased in Canada, violence against women remains pervasive—one in three women will experience violence in their lifetime. It impacts us all – women and girls, men and boys, families and communities. There is a strong need and moral imperative for a coordinated national action plan to strengthen the systems that respond to violence against women and address the systemic issues that underpin it.

A Federal Strategy on Gender-Based violence must:

- Prioritize all forms of gender-based violence – intimate partner violence, sexual violence and harassment, cyber-misogyny, child sexual abuse, and stalking. In addition, many of our staff identified human trafficking as a form of violence that the federal government urgently needs to address.
- Establish national standards to coordinate policies and services across jurisdictions. Our concern is one of equity and ensuring that all women – no matter where they live in Canada – have access to services and resources that are high-quality, trauma-informed and culturally-appropriate to support them in building lives free from violence.
- Ensure adequate, stable and consistent funding to support the implementation of the strategy.

- Tackle the root causes of violence against women, including women’s economic inequality. Safe lives post-violence requires that women have access to safe, affordable and permanent homes, quality and affordable child care, and adequate incomes.
- Support reliable data collection allowing for better tracking and evaluation.

Priorities for Toronto

Addressing Women’s Poverty: The United Way has named Toronto the income inequality capital of Canada. Our city is challenged with over 90,000 households on the waiting list for affordable housing. The rise of precarious employment in Toronto keeps women trapped in poverty. Without subsidized child care, full-time employment and pay equity – women cannot afford to move ahead or feed their families. Ultimately, we know that poverty and women’s economic inequality set the conditions for violence. As one staff person wrote: “The moment that a woman recognizes the need to leave an unhealthy or dangerous space, she also starts to recognize the structural obstacles in her way that often ‘glue’ her permanently to her abuser/violence.” The federal government needs to eliminate these obstacles through strengthening the country’s social safety net.

Diversity and Inclusion: Toronto is a multicultural and diverse city. The federal strategy must recognize that women’s experiences of violence intersect with race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, immigrant and refugee status, age and disability. One solution does not fit all. The federal government must ensure that there are coordinated, clear and effective services and standards for victims/survivors of violence against women that respect and respond to this diversity.

Indigenous Women: We applaud the government for moving forward with an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women. Toronto has one of the largest Indigenous populations in Canada and Indigenous women experience disproportionately higher levels of violence than any other group. There is a need for more traditional healing programs that are developed in collaboration with Indigenous partners. Looking across Canada, the federal government must end the inequities facing Indigenous Peoples in the areas of child welfare, education, health care and basics like water and housing as highlighted in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report.

With respect to the inquiry itself, we urge the government to address issues raised by the Native Women’s Association of Canada about processes to address historic cases of murdered and missing Indigenous women.

LGBTQ Torontonians: As one staff person wrote: “There is a large LGBTQ community within Toronto who have special needs and experience discrimination and violence at an increased rate.” We know that transgender women face an increased risk of violence. As well, societal discrimination and lack of education on identity politics can prevent transgender women from accessing the services they need to recover and heal from violence. YWCA Toronto has joined with a coalition of civil society groups in urging all MPs to support Bill C-16, known as the Trans Human Rights Act, which will update the Human Rights Act and Criminal Code to include gender identity and gender expression, ensuring protection for all transgender Canadians. We also call on the federal government to dedicate specific resources for education and programming that meet the safety needs of LGBTQ communities.

Newcomer Women: Toronto welcomes immigrants and refugees from around the world. The federal government must do more to provide newcomer women with information about settlement services,

crisis resources, violence against women programs, and their legal rights under Canadian law including criminal, family, and immigration law. Services and supports must be culturally appropriate and available in a variety of languages to ensure that women have access to legal and community services if they experience violence.

Primary Prevention Programs and Strategies

YWCA Toronto supports funding for primary prevention programs and strategies that promote prevention and public awareness about violence against women. One staff person pointed to powerful public education campaigns run by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) that – over a sustained period – sparked a societal shift in attitudes about drinking and driving. Others wrote about the need for programs for both boys and girls that start from childhood that teach about consent, respect and healthy relationships. One staff person wrote: “If you want to change societal norms, you need to educate children and reinforce that in the school system.”

The girls we work with at YWCA Toronto’s Girls’ Centre tell us about the need for prevention and public awareness programs that are youth-led, media savvy, and that engage them on issues such as violence, cyber-bullying, sexual exploitation, healthy relationships and consent, critical thinking, and social change. We support permanent funding for girls’ programs that promote resiliency and leadership, in recognition of the disproportionate impact that violence has on women and girls.

We encourage the federal government to look at replicating existing primary prevention programs, including the Government of Ontario’s *Who Will You Help* public awareness campaign on sexual violence, particularly its focus on bystander intervention. As well, we support the *I Am A Kind Man* campaign run through Native Friendship Associations in Ontario and Alberta which engages boys and men to speak out on violence against Indigenous women. Changing the behaviour of men and boys is essential to the long-term prevention of violence against women. We need more of these programs right across Canada. However, resources for programs for men and boys must be provided from a separate funding envelope to ensure that funding to the women’s sector is not diminished.

Support Systems for Victims and Survivors

Violence Against Women Shelters/Transition Houses: We are encouraged by the federal government’s recent announcement to commit \$89.9 million over the next two years for shelter construction and renovation. This capital investment will help to expand shelters and increase accessibility. Federal investment in shelters and transitional housing is critical to moving towards the government’s promise of “no one turned away.” We encourage the federal government to consult with our sector to ensure that these funds have the most impact and strongest outcomes.

In addition, we urge the federal government to prioritize closing the gaps in access to shelter that exist for women with disabilities, for Indigenous women, for transgender women, for women from Canada’s wide range of cultural communities, for women in Northern territories and rural areas and for women facing addictions and mental health challenges. Leadership at the federal level is required to ensure that shelters receive adequate operational funding to close these gaps.

Free Trauma Counselling: YWCA Toronto has been a strong voice at the provincial and federal levels advocating for free, high-quality trauma informed counselling for victims/survivors of violence and for

their children. Women tell us that they cannot access the supports they desperately need because they simply cannot afford counselling fees. There are long waiting lists. Some counsellors are inadequately trained. Many programs are short-term or not available at all, such as addiction detox beds. And most importantly, the types of alternative supports survivors find most helpful – like art therapy – are often not funded. Leadership at the federal level is required to increase accessibility across Canada for all women.

There is also a need for the federal government to fund more programming geared specifically to newcomer women where conversations about trauma, violence or mental health can be discussed. There are specific trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) programs for refugees that come from war-torn countries but the focus is on generalized violence and the trauma of war, which can exclude newcomer and refugee women who have experienced gender-based violence, particularly repeated incidents of sexual violence and rape.

Sexual Assault Centres: The federal government must provide adequate funding to sexual assault, rape crisis and other services that support women who are victims/survivors of sexual violence. These centres are on the front-lines providing critical trauma-informed support for women and girls. National standards are particularly needed for women accessing services in hospitals and health care centres. In many rural and northern communities there are no sexual assault services. This inequity urgently needs to be addressed.

Workplace: At the provincial level in Ontario, YWCA Toronto is a supporter of Bill 177 introduced to allow victims/survivors of domestic violence to take paid time away from work so they can benefit from services that can be hard to access outside weekday hours. We encourage the federal government to amend the Canada Labour Code in order to implement similar changes to support federally regulated workers who experience violence.

Support Beyond Shelters: As one staff person wrote: “Shelters are there for women (when there is space available) and do very good work, but shelters are very difficult places to stay and housing options for women and children are nearly impossible to obtain.” Women and children deserve better and require safe affordable housing so they can rebuild their lives. No woman should be forced to live in a shelter for an extended period of time - or to return to a violent spouse - because she cannot secure safe affordable housing. It is critical that a gender-based violence strategy addresses all policy areas that affect women’s vulnerability to violence and ability to access services and protections. This means that the federal government must enact national standards and develop social policies to ensure access to safe affordable, permanent housing, quality and affordable child care, and adequate incomes.

Justice Related Responses

Over the past few years, we have witnessed women speaking out through online campaigns like #beenrapedneverreported and #webelievesurvivors about their experiences of sexual violence and their concerns about how our criminal justice system rarely convicts abusers. We have also heard from racialized and Indigenous women about police practices that ignore the violence they experience and fail to protect them from it. Community-based complaints processes must be put in place across the country to address cases where police inaction on gender-based violence is identified.

One staff person wrote: “The police response [can] differ based on a woman’s postal code and race. This is traumatizing for women who report violence only to be confronted by systemic racist responses.” Another staff person wrote: “My disillusionment about our legal system only serves to grow over my years in social

work as I support women victims through legal processes. There is rarely justice coming out of our justice system.” Another wrote: “I think that women do not trust the system because offenders are not being prosecuted, and that leaves victims/survivors living in fear. Also, it feels like women are not taken seriously when they point out the violence taking place.”

Some of the reforms that need to happen are basic. For instance, women must be able to access free independent legal counsel and there must be mandatory training for legal professionals. Looking at the bigger picture, the federal and provincial government must explore alternative justice models – from special courts to restorative justice. We need new approaches because what we are doing now simply is not working.

Free Legal Representation for Women: YWCA Toronto has been a strong voice at the provincial and federal levels advocating for victims/survivors of violence to have access to free legal representation. Many women we work with are forced to face a variety of legal processes without access to counsel due to legal-aid income thresholds that are not realistic. Women are extremely vulnerable to further violence when they attempt to take action to enforce their legal rights. They should not be left to do this on their own. Women need a lawyer in their corner who can help them prepare, give legal advice and intervene when rights guaranteed by the Supreme Court of Canada are ignored. Federal leadership is needed to make this a reality across Canada.

Rehabilitative Programs for Perpetrators: The program that is best known by our staff is the Partner Assault Response (PAR) run by the Ontario government. Our sector has expressed many concerns with how this program is being run – the length of programs has been reduced, the waiting list is long, and some perpetrators respond better to individual counselling rather than group work. Further, men who want to change their abusive behaviour are not able to self-refer, or to access PAR through other external referrals. We urge the federal government to develop national evidence-based standards on the effectiveness of existing programs for perpetrators and measure their impact on recidivism rates and the safety of women and children.

Training for Legal Professionals: It is essential that police, lawyers and judges receive formal training about family and sexual violence, including trauma and its impact on memory, and on the tactics an abuser will use during court proceedings such as criminal, family, and immigration matters. This training must be mandatory. The federal government must also work to ensure that the RCMP and federally appointed judges reflect the diversity of Canada.

In closing, YWCA Toronto offers our assistance as civil society partners to move forward with urgently needed changes to help women escape and recover from violence as well as address its root causes. We are deeply committed to building a better future for women and girls in Toronto and across Canada.

Maureen Adams, Director of Advocacy and Communications, mtadams@ywcatoronto.org
Etana Cain, Senior Advocacy and Communications Officer, ecain@ywcatoronto.org

