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Violence Against Women Is and Was its Own Pandemic_COVID-19 Made Things Worse

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Violence Against Women Is and Was its Own Pandemic: COVID-19 Made Things Worse

Not all are "Safe at Home": Violence Against Women Servic...



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(This blog is part of the GHE@Western blog [series inspired by 16 days of activism](#))

Very early in the COVID-19 pandemic, I wrote two pieces ([here](#) and [here](#)) outlining that, as with other global crises, a new pandemic would mean frightening increases in the frequency and severity of violence at home: women would be confined, due to lockdowns, with their abusers, with little or no opportunity to seek help, and the compounding stressors of the pandemic (employment uncertainty, fear of becoming ill, kids at home all the time, etc.) would create a perfect storm for escalating violence. Sadly, this has [proven largely true](#), with, for example, rates of femicide (the intentional killing of women because they're women) [increasing](#) in Canada in line with the pandemic, along with the need for services.

What also concerned me in early 2020 was how chronically stressed and underfunded organizations would be able to continue to function with the additional burdens of COVID-19 protocols and polices. This impact, it seemed, would be especially severe in what are called "congregate settings" – i.e., places where people live closely together, such as long-term care, hostels and the like. When I thought, and [wrote](#), about the looming increases in violence against women, it was also clear that the very services tasked with providing safety and support for women and their children would be faced with "[impossible choices](#)" – especially in how to balance safety from violence with safety from COVID-19.

To examine the impact of COVID-19 policy responses on services for abused women, our research team partnered with five gender-based violence (i.e., domestic violence and sexual assault) services in Ontario. The [Violence Against Women Services in a Pandemic Project](#) was funded by a Western University Catalyst Grant, and later by a Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada Connections Grant to support mobilizing our findings to audiences,

equity with the network, email
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including policy makers, funders and the public, who need to hear them. Some of our key findings, especially regarding how pandemic protocols and rules impacted service delivery, are explained in this [video](#), while other aspects of our findings, in addition to academic papers (e.g., [here](#) on use of hotels, which are not a safe alternative for women), are described in a series of [summary briefs and infographics](#). We even, using a novel space analysis technique developed by an undergraduate student on our team, produced a [Space Planning Handbook](#), which is already being used to design more flexible and adaptable shelters.

Outside of the new knowledge generated from this series of studies about how vulnerable organizations who serve vulnerable clients are impacted by a crisis, we also learned several other key things:

- 1) collaborative, values-based research among a group of trusted partners from the community and academia is a clear path to developing actionable solutions to pressing problems;
- 2) involving new researchers (students, post-docs and faculty early in their careers) brings amazing energy and innovative ideas to research and knowledge mobilization processes;
- 3) even as COVID-19 recedes, we are left with the ongoing gender-based violence pandemic, which is highly inter-related with overwhelming rates of trauma and structural violence, including racism, discrimination, substance use stigma and pervasive inequities between groups based on intersecting identities of gender, race, Indigenous status, ability, sexual orientation, etc.

COVID-19, and our collective and often inadequate responses to it, made these highly visible, and sometimes much worse. We now need sustained attention to repairing society to better survive the next disaster. My hope is that by next year's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, we'll have a better tale to tell.

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