

We need far stronger support systems in the fight against gender-based violence, says expert

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The [COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention](#) to the rising rates of gender-based violence, highlighting an ongoing, but growing, crisis.

For decades, [service providers and advocates](#) have called for stronger supports for [victims](#)/survivors and their communities, underscoring the urgent need to direct resources towards violence prevention and [community services](#).

As an expert in gender-based violence and prevention, I recently [conducted a research review](#) that looked at how the #MeToo movement and COVID-19 pandemic have changed the landscape of gender-based violence in North America.

A key finding from this project is that awareness of gender-based violence is growing. This finding offers opportunities and hope, but my research also highlights the limitations of increased awareness. It raises some important questions: what does this awareness mean for victims/survivors? And what are the implications for violence prevention efforts?

Gender-based violence awareness

Awareness of gender-based violence includes understanding how prevalent it is, the different forms it can take—for example, physical, emotional, sexual and economic—and the impacts it can have on individuals and communities.

Awareness also includes knowing how to intervene, prevent violence and provide information about the kinds of supports available in one's community.

Research shows that greater awareness helps individuals [recognize abusive behavior](#) and [identify when they have experienced violence](#). This is a vital first step that victims/survivors take before seeking help. Help-seeking is a difficult process that involves disclosing one's experiences to get support.

This is why the #MeToo movement was so powerful. It gave rise to public dialogue about sexual violence and gender-based violence, leading to [more victims/survivors](#) disclosing their experiences.

The movement also resulted in an [increase in sexual assaults reported to the police](#). In 2017, the same year the movement originally founded by Tarana Burke emerged online, there were more police-reported [sexual assaults](#) in Canada than in any year since 1998.

Seeking help is crucial

Seeking help is directly linked to improved well-being and social inclusion. Gender-based violence has [damaging effects on physical and mental health](#), both in the short- and long-term. It is associated with injury, chronic disease and pain, anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts.

Gender-based violence can also [negatively impact employment and community participation](#).

However, these negative impacts can be greatly reduced when victims/survivors seek help and are met with support, compassion and resources. Because of this, receiving [positive reactions to disclosures are crucial](#) and [can influence whether a victim/survivor will reach out for help](#) in the future.

This underscores a need to educate the public about [how to respond](#) to disclosures of violence and to ensure that all professionals working with victims/survivors receive the necessary training to support them.

Gaps still remain

Gaps in awareness pose barriers to help-seeking, [particularly for underserved](#) and [marginalized communities](#). These gaps prevent victims/survivors from accessing the care they need and deserve.

One such gap is misinformation about gender-based violence. For instance, [rape myths](#)—false but widespread beliefs about sexual violence—can deter victims/survivors from seeking support.

They can also present barriers to support and justice when victims/survivors do disclose, if those hearing the disclosure accept false beliefs about [sexual violence](#), victims and perpetrators.

A [study of online disclosures of sexual violence on a peer support mental health app](#) found that rape myths appeared in one-fifth of disclosures.

This finding provides a glimpse into the kinds of messages victims/survivors receive and the social environments they face if, and when, they choose to disclose or seek help—even when those environments are intended to be supportive, like a mental health app.

Lessons from the pandemic

Gaps in awareness also include a lack of knowledge about available community resources. This became clear during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic [when rates of gender-based violence surged](#) and many victims/survivors experienced increased isolation.

As a result, victims/survivors' ability to access both informal support, like family and friends, and formal support, such as medical care and [mental health](#) services, was reduced.

Victims/survivors [were also confused about which services were still operating](#) and how to safely access them. An important lesson from the

pandemic is the need for stronger communication strategies to reach victims/survivors in times of crisis.

Responding to growing need

While there are still gaps, it is clear that a growing awareness about gender-based violence has led to more victims/survivors seeking out help. However, awareness alone is not enough to effectively address this form of violence.

The growing demand for services has put additional strain on already under-resourced community organizations like shelters, transition houses and sexual assault centers.

Chronic under-funding [has exacerbated](#) both [existing and new challenges](#) as these organizations adapted their services to meet the growing needs of communities during the pandemic.

As a result, [waitlists for sexual assault centers have grown](#) and organizations that deal with gender-based violence are [facing a labor crisis](#). [Workers are experiencing burnout](#) and organizations are seeing high rates of staff turnover.

Building on gains made in [awareness](#) about gender-based violence, governments and communities must increase the capacity of community organizations and offer them greater stability moving forward. Committing resources to [violence prevention](#) and services for victims/survivors is necessary to meet current and future needs.

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