

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence Against Women Services

RESEARCH
STUDY

GENDERED IMPACTS IN WOMEN'S SHELTERS

WHAT WE DID

We examined how the co-occurrence of the COVID-19 and gender-based violence/violence against women (GBV/VAW) pandemics resulted in a disproportionate burden on women involved in this sector. We spoke to more than 50 people in total, including women using shelter services, shelter staff, and shelter directors/leaders.

WHAT WE FOUND

Gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the GBV/VAW service sector were identified at the: 1) service level, including mothering while accessing VAW services and a perceived imperative that women should be grateful for any, even suboptimal, care received; 2) organization level, including caregiving and emotional labour, juggling multiple roles, and exhaustion, self-care, and gendered expectations of leaders; and 3) structural level, specifically, the GBV/VAW sector "losing ground." COVID-19 disproportionately impacted women in the sector through additional caregiving responsibilities, progress loss for women, and gender-blind policy-level decision making.

SERVICE LEVEL

"I'm grateful for what they've given me... it could be a lot worse, and I could have no help at all. But I don't have other [supports]... There [are] no other resources."
(shelter client)

"When I do my counselling sessions on the phone, just to have that hour of peace and quiet [is important, but] being stuck in one room I feel like I wasn't able to talk about a lot of past trauma... I don't want my kids hearing it."
(shelter client)

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL*

"So, our entire infrastructure is being run and managed by women and the reality... is childcare and the responsibility of parents has just been such a low priority and we're now bearing the burden of that."

"No, I'm sorry there's no amount of tea in the world that is going to fix the patriarchy right now... if one more person tells me to self-care or pour a cup of tea I literally was going to explode."

STRUCTURAL LEVEL*

"I think that one of the [areas] where gender plays into the context of our organization is [that] everyone's work is still undervalued. It is [mostly] women who do the work and [are] underpaid."

"We're back in the '80s; we have nothing for women right now. We have no access to justice, the police ... Nobody's keeping the perpetrators and they're continuing to abuse, harass, kill the women... And I don't know how we get that back."

*These quotes are from executive directors of shelters or related services.

WHAT WE RECOMMEND

For government/policy/funding audiences:

1. These findings call for policymakers and funders to acknowledge the critical work done in the GBV/VAW service sector and to attend to the implications of policy decisions, particularly for women. Pandemic recovery for COVID-19, and proactive planning for future crises, must incorporate a feminist lens to address the disproportionate, and negative, impacts of the pandemic on women. Gender norms need to continue to be challenged.
2. GBV/VAW workers require resources to support their health and wellness during post-pandemic recovery. Governments and funders should prioritize comprehensive support plans for women in shelters, as well as for staff and leaders, that incorporate a gendered lens (e.g., expanded counselling sessions, comprehensive plans to combat vicarious trauma, etc.).

For the GBV/VAW services sector, including organizational leaders and staff:

3. There is a need to alter the self-care discourse within the sector. Expectations for self-care related to positivity and individual transformation are common in this sector but do not adequately address the scope of stress and vicarious trauma that is experienced. Moreover, self-care expectations often minimize experiences of those working in the field and also download responsibility to be well onto individuals regardless of their control over their living and working conditions.
4. During a time of uncertainty and loss, leaders felt pressure to adhere to traditionally masculine or feminine gender roles. These norms are damaging to individuals and had ramifications for organizations and the sector as a whole. The 'warrior' narratives present among both those experiencing violence and those providing services during the pandemic were likely intended to highlight the strength of women. However, they were largely unhelpful, preventing women from processing the difficulty and weight of their intersecting roles as well as impeding their ability to get help when needed. These narratives need to continue to be challenged.

For the general public, including media:

5. Staff and leaders working at GBV/VAW agencies experienced increased caregiving demands and stress at work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staying in shelter hindered autonomy and decision-making for mothers. Traditional gender norms need to continue to be challenged to reduce negative impacts on women during crises, whether they are clients, staff or leaders.

For more information:

- <https://gtvincubator.uwo.ca/vawservicespandemic/>
- Mantler, T., Burd, C., MacGregor, J. C. D., Veenendaal, J., McLean, I., Wathen, C. N., & The Violence Against Women Services in a Pandemic Team. "There's no amount of tea in the world that is going to fix the patriarchy right now": The gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for women in the gender-based violence sector. *Under review.*