



AN URGENT CALL TO ACTION


RECOGNITION OF THE
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE
EPIDEMIC IN TORONTO, CANADA

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A black and white close-up photograph of a woman's face, showing her eyes, nose, and mouth. The image is partially obscured by the text and design elements of the page.

INTRODUCTION

As an example of community grassroots advocacy, Aura Freedom and Women's Habitat of Etobicoke, along with other organizations, grassroots groups, advocates, survivors, and more, are **calling on the City of Toronto to declare Intimate Partner Violence an epidemic.**

So far, more than 30 municipalities across Ontario have made their own declarations of IPV as an epidemic.¹ However, Toronto (both the capital of Ontario and Canada's largest municipality) has yet to recognize the urgency of this growing crisis that impacts its citizens everyday.

"...Part of the reason [the epidemic declaration] is important is because using that public health frame to understand what is happening is another way of telling survivors that what's happening to them is not their fault...It is a sociological phenomenon. It is a society-wide problem," states Kirsten Mercer, a lawyer who represented at the coroner's inquest into the 2015 deaths of Nathalie Warmerdam, Carol Culleton and Anastasia Kuzyk in Renfrew County, Ontario. The same jury made this recommendation -and 85 others- to the Ontario Government a year ago.¹

This brief reflects the growing statistics at the city, province, and country level. It is widely known among those of us working to end gender-based violence (GBV) and male violence against women (MVAW) that **women are highest at risk of experiencing violence at the hands of the men they know - most often their husbands, partners, or exes.** This is not the result of "random acts of violence" at the hands of "madmen", but a reflection of misogyny, patriarchy, colonialism, and other oppressive systems that exist and intersect, resulting in the abuse and murder of women and children.

Awareness and recognition is not enough - but it is a start. One that costs nothing but could create change for generations. **We urge the City of Toronto to take this vital step.**

CONSIDERATIONS

The prevalence of DV and IPV in Toronto is under-researched and efforts to remedy this are under-funded. Although the statistics, accounts, and information that are available and provided in this report are staggering, the reality of intimate partner violence in our city is far worse.

Toronto Police Superintendent Pauline Gray reported to City News that there is **definitely** a rise in domestic violence. She adds that the Toronto Police don't believe their police data truly reflects the severity of the problem. As Superintendent Gray states, "some victims don't report their attackers."² And those of us doing this work know that it is not just some, but **most**.

Indeed, domestic abuse is immensely under-reported. Domestic Abuse Services Oxford estimates that **only 25% of domestic violence incidents are reported.**³

**"Men are afraid that women will laugh at them.
Women are afraid that men will kill them."**

- Margaret Atwood

IPV & DV IN TORONTO

9 Femicides have occurred in Toronto in OAITH's **current reporting year**. Of these, **two-thirds** of the victims were known by their perpetrator (i.e. intimate partner, family, or otherwise known.)¹⁹

47,000+ **domestic-related calls** were made to the 5 Police Forces across the Greater Toronto Area in 2019.²

1st **Toronto's first homicide of 2023** was, in fact, a **femicide**. A mother, 70, was murdered with her son as the accused in her killing.⁴

"While the recent declarations by different municipalities are very encouraging, we know that this epidemic is not new."
Marissa Kokkoros, ED, Aura Freedom

Remembering Daniella

Among the women killed in 2022 was 23-year old Daniella Mallia, whose murder by her ex-boyfriend Dylon Dowman, led to misconduct charges being laid against the Toronto police officer who had failed to investigate her case. **Daniella went to Toronto police 3 days before her death** to report that her ex-boyfriend was harassing, stalking, and threatening her via text, and she feared for her safety. According to police documentation outlining the Police Service Act misconduct charges laid, the constable took "no action" to protect her, including failing to lay charges despite having reasonable grounds, and instead cautioning Daniella despite "ample evidence that (she) was the victim".⁵

59%

According to OAITH, **most femicide cases** occurred within the **Central and Toronto regions**, accounting for **over half of all femicide cases** within the 2021-2022 Annual Femicide List.⁶

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OAITH's monthly Ontario femicide tracker shows that of the 4 femicide cases (confirmed & unconfirmed) in May 2023 ALONE, 3 were in Toronto.⁷

58%

The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability (CFOJA) 2022 report indicates that 58% of females were killed in urban areas - like Toronto.⁸

VOICES FROM TORONTO'S GBV FRONTLINES

WHAT ARE WE SEEING?

Aura Freedom, as part of our **Relentless Resilience report** and **campaign**, interviewed frontline workers in Toronto who support intimate partner and domestic violence survivors daily. They reported many disturbing trends, some outlined below:

Violent men will often call the police (before the women they are abusing do) to escape charges, lay the blame on her, and jeopardize her future.

Women who call the police to report IPV or DV are sometimes arrested themselves because they "fought back".

Newcomer, migrant, and racialized women are not calling the police or reporting IPV or DV because they believe their children will be taken away.⁵

GRASSROOTS ACCOUNTS FROM THE FRONTLINE

While being interviewed for **RELENTLESS RESILIENCE**, Women's Habitat - a Toronto domestic violence shelter - shared a disturbing trend acknowledged by many frontline workers. A pattern of violent men calling the police before the woman does to escape being charged or to jeopardize her future, or women calling the police to report domestic violence, only to end up being arrested themselves because they fought back. As one staff member described,

"He'll rip his shirt, scratch himself and call the police; they walk in and she's arrested and charged," said one staff member.



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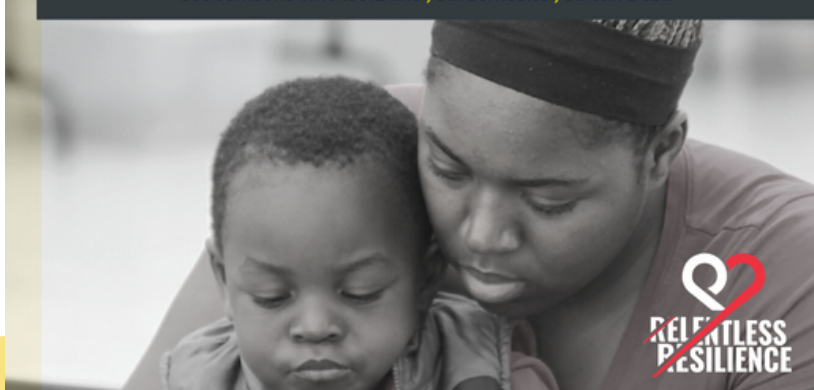
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GRASSROOTS INSIGHT

Women of colour have been historically targeted by child welfare agencies, which can stop them from getting help for domestic violence.

When interviewed for Relentless Resilience, **Safia Hirsi** from **Central Neighbourhood House** in Toronto says that some newcomer women do not call the police as they believe their children will be taken away.

"Children's Aid workers visiting newcomer communities are often young, white women. Hiring someone who looks like the community would be beneficial. They're very nice and very helpful, but sometimes it's better to see someone who looks like you. Someone you can trust."



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VOICES FROM TORONTO'S GBV FRONTLINES



Another shelter worker continues,
"The people who make the decisions need to realize
that children are used as a pawn a lot of the time.
They're used as a pawn and killed by their fathers
just to get back at Mom, and I think that needs to
be believed. I think that needs to be looked at.
Children are murdered."

**Everyone's shoulders slump.
Children are murdered.**



"They just don't want to admit it because then
they'd have to say they're a part of this, right?...
And the court forced her to meet him. This doesn't
just happen once, this happens multiple times."

Another staff member adds a disturbing detail,
"And the women say it. They will tell the police:
'He's going to hurt my child.
My child doesn't want to go there.'"



"But no. We have to follow the rules.
And then how does that mother ever
forgive herself for sending her
child to see him? She won't."

But that was his whole plan. To hurt her.

"And then the courts won't talk about why she
was forced to let him see that child,"
adds her colleague.
"But that's exactly why it happened."



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND AMBER ALERTS

This excerpt (left) from an interview between Aura
Freedom and Women's Habitat of Etobicoke, describes the
connection between Domestic Violence and Amber Alerts:

They discuss a woman currently staying at the shelter whose
child does not want to visit their father because he is violent.
But if she doesn't send him, she'll be held in contempt of court.

**Who is protecting this mother and child?
Because the system sure as hell isn't.
Then, we see the Amber Alerts.**

An excerpt from **RELENTLESS RESILIENCE** - Author Marissa
Kokkoros interviews women's shelter staff from Women's Habitat



WE'RE NOT WAITING ANYMORE.

**Children are used as pawns. Sometimes, they
are even killed by their fathers to get back
at their mothers for leaving the relationship.**

**Mothers are forced to meet with their
abusers and forced to let their abusers see
their children - whom they are also abusing.**

**Mothers are telling frontline workers and
police that their children do not want to see
their father, or that he will hurt them.⁵**

IPV & DV IN ONTARIO

52 According to OAITH, in Ontario alone, **52 women & girls lost their lives in 52 weeks** from November 2021 to November 2022. 36% of these femicides were by an intimate partner. Over **73% were known to the victim in some way.**⁶

8 to 88 is the age range of women and girls who were victims of femicide in those 52 weeks. **There is no age for femicide.**⁶

30 more femicides have been recorded by OAITH in the 30 weeks since. **Femicide is happening weekly in Ontario.**⁹

Ontario's Ignored Epidemic

Ontario's Domestic Violence Death Review Committee chair, Prabhu Rajan, states that **domestic violence deaths in Ontario are "an epidemic"**.

He also highlights that **the numbers aren't changing.**

71%

of cases where someone was killed (most often a women) by a current or former partner in Ontario had a history of domestic violence.¹⁰

75%

of femicides in Ontario tracked by OAITH since November 2022 were perpetrated by someone known to the victim: a current or former partner (29%), a family member (25%), or another man known to the victim (21%).⁷

88%

of spousal homicide perpetrators were male while 89% of victims were female. IPV is a gendered epidemic.¹¹

IPV & DV IN ONTARIO

36% of Canadian femicides in 2022 were committed in Ontario. **Ontario had the largest number of women and girls killed in Canada** in the years recorded (2018-2022).⁹

24,000 women were victims of IPV in Ontario in 2019. **Ontario recorded the highest number of victims of IPV in Canada.**¹²

307 Women and girls have been killed in Ontario alone since 2018, according to the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability. Of those, almost **90% of perpetrators were male.**¹³



GRASSROOTS EXPERTS

In 2003, Deborah Sinclair was appointed to the Domestic Violence Death Review Committee of the Chief Coroner's office of Ontario.

"There is no question in my mind that intimate femicide is a gendered crime," says Deborah. More than 90% of the victims were female and most of the killers were male.

When children were killed in this context, it was often as a retaliation or punishment towards the mother. The worst and deepest way to hurt a mother is to harm her child.

Most intimate murders of women and children are both predictable and preventable. In more than 70% of the cases we reviewed, there were a minimum of seven risk factors."

Deborah Sinclair was interviewed for the Relentless Resilience report by author Marissa Kokkoros. Read the full report at aurafreedom.org

WE'RE NOT WAITING ANYMORE.

IPV is **preventable** and **predictable.** **7** or more risk factors were found in over 70% of intimate murders of women and children.⁵

"Survivors of IPV are not safe in Family Court, which is often utilized by abusers to continue their torture of ex-partners and children. This Coercive Control is still ignored by many in the justice system and government, resulting in immense trauma, femicide and filicide."

Marissa Kokkoros, Executive Director, Aura Freedom

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS

Indigenous women and girls are **disproportionately affected** by intimate partner and domestic violence. Indigenous women, girls, and 2-Spirit people continue to be abused and murdered at alarming rates.

Indigenous Women are

12x

**more likely to be
murdered than any
other woman in
Canada.⁵**

**Indigenous Women
experience spousal
violence at a rate**

3x

**higher than non-
Indigenous women.⁵**

The Indigenous segment of Aura Freedom's Relentless Resilience campaign was created in partnership with the **Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto (NWRCT)**. For a sobering look at the MMIWG2S genocide in Canada, explore NWRCT's **4000 Cover Stories** campaign.

Remembering Cheyenne

Cheyenne Santana Marie Fox, 20, was found lifeless at the bottom of a Toronto high-rise on April 25, 2013, having plunged from the 24th floor.

Several calls to 911 were made in the hours preceding her death.

Despite this, Toronto police initially found there was no evidence of criminal activity in her death. Cheyenne's father strongly believes she was being trafficked and was murdered.

Her case remains open.

The National Inquiry into Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women concluded that the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women, girls, and 2-Spirit people amounts to **Genocide.**

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GIRLS



"The total number of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2-Spirit peoples is still not known.

This, in itself, speaks volumes.

It means that Indigenous women and girls were not important enough to count or to search for. It means that the pain and cries of their families were not important enough to consider.

This, to me, is Canada's greatest shame."

Marissa Kokkoros, author of Relentless Resilience and Executive Director of Aura Freedom



WE'RE NOT WAITING ANYMORE.

There is still no definitive number of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2-Spirit people.

Indigenous women and girls often deal with stigma and blame for the violence they have experienced.

Indigenous women and girls experience especially brutal or excessive violence, often being dehumanized in the process.



THE REAL HISTORY

Many still blame Indigenous women and girls for the violence they experience, instead of recognizing how **colonization** and **systemic racism** have created an environment where they are at the greatest risk of violence and exploitation in Canada.

To experience that type of trauma and loss, only then to be blamed for it, is devastating. We all have a role to play in ending violence against Indigenous women and girls.



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GRASSROOTS POWER

Indigenous women and girls are often dehumanized and experience violence that is especially brutal or excessive.

Melissa Compton, Indigenous frontline worker and Relentless Resilience contributor, shared that often, before anything else, she works on humanizing the women and youth she supports.

"A lot of the time I have to pull back and focus on just humanizing them in the moment. I tell them they are as resilient as those seven generations that they are holding onto. Sometimes I have to go right into the (Indigenous) teachings and have them honour and recognize who they walk with, rather than focusing on the trauma that they're carrying right now."



WE'RE NOT WAITING ANYMORE.

IPV & DV IN CANADA

2 in 5 Canadian women suffer some form of abuse at the hands of their partners.³

6.2 million Canadian women and girls aged 15 and older will report some abuse in the context of an intimate relationship.¹⁴

114,132 victims of police-reported IPV in Canada in 2021 - this is the **7th consecutive year of gradual increase.**¹⁵

IPV IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Each year in Canada, roughly 362,000 children witness domestic violence.

These children have double the rate of psychiatric disorders as children from non-violent homes.



25%

increase in police-reported family violence against children and youth in Canada since 2009.¹⁵

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women killed in Canada had at least one child.⁵

In Canada, 30 to 40 children per year are killed by a parent.

There is no greater way to hurt a mother than by hurting her children. Abusers know this and some will harm and even kill their own children as a way to enact revenge on Mom for leaving. This is the ugly face of Male Violence Against Women. Jennifer Kagan, who lost her daughter Keira to filicide at the hands of her ex-husband, advocated for Keira's Law to educate judges on domestic violence. We can, and must, do better.

THE GREATER IMPACT OF IPV ON COMMUNITIES

Violence against women is affecting every single aspect of life in Toronto.

From housing and healthcare, to education and the economy, male violence against women is impacting families, communities, and entire countries. So, when we work to end violence against women, we are actually working to see our communities – and cities – **thrive**.

Women who leave a partner to
raise children on their own are

5x

more likely to be poorer than if
they had stayed.²⁰

81.9%

of DV survivors reported that DV
negatively affected their job.⁵

There are

19 Million

women and girls in Canada. Half of
them have experienced at least one
incident of physical or sexual
violence since age 16.⁵

Girls are

1.5x

more likely than boy to
experience violence at home.²¹

It costs Canada

\$7.4 Billion

annually to deal with the
aftermath of spousal violence
alone. Globally, GBV can cost
countries 1.2-3.7% of their GDP.⁵

64%

of women who have experienced IPV
exhibit symptoms of Post-
Traumatic Stress Disorder. Women
with both recent IPV and IPV
experience over 12 months ago have
the poorest overall health.⁵

300

women and children are turned
away on any given night from
Canadian shelters.⁵

6000

Women and children, on any given
night in Canada, sleep in shelters
because it isn't safe at home.⁵



IPV & DV IN CANADA

9x Women are 9x more likely to be murdered by an intimate partner than a stranger.³

200 women and girls were killed by violence in Canada in 2022 - the majority by men. This is the **highest number recorded** by the Femicide Observatory since they began tracking femicides.¹⁷

27% increase in the number of Canadian killings of women and girls involving an accused male in 2022 (since 2019).¹⁸

15% of all homicides in Canada are spousal homicides.³

Every 2.5 Days
a woman or
girl is killed by
violence in
Canada.⁵

WOMEN AND GIRLS FACE THE GREATEST DANGER IN THEIR OWN HOMES.

In Canada, 55% of women killed by their partners or family members were killed in their own home or the home they shared with the accused.



53% OF SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

said that at least one type of abuse happened at or near their workplace.



**Toronto women and girls are not
safe in their homes, or at work.**



OUR CALL TO ACTION

Intimate Partner Violence affects every single aspect of life in Toronto, from housing and food security, to health, education, and the economy. Statistics confirm that this is a gendered epidemic. While this has been occurring (and been ignored) for centuries, we must recognize the growing anti-women movements in our city. Lives are, quite literally, on the line as we see a rise in femicide and hate crimes against women on public transit.

In Ontario alone, women are being killed on a weekly basis, most often by the men closest to them. It is not lost on us that **in the time it will take for this brief to be published, another woman in our province will have been murdered.**

Intimate Partner Violence and Violence Against Women have already been recognized as an epidemic in over 30 municipalities across Ontario.

“Declaring intimate partner violence an epidemic will send a strong message to the thousands of survivors that this City, Province and Country are no longer willing to ignore the obvious. Women's Habitat of Etobicoke has been supporting women and children, victims of domestic violence and intimate partner violence since 1978. From April 2022 to March 2023, we supported over 800 women and children fleeing violence. Throughout the past 45 years, we have been unwavering in our commitment to supporting our community, even as the frequency of incidents of intimate partner violence continue to rise. We can no longer wait for change to occur, we must be the change. Each day, women are being killed and the City of Toronto must recognize intimate partner violence as an epidemic as an essential step in taking meaningful action to address it.”

Carla Neto, Executive Director, Women's Habitat of Etobicoke

“Women are the custodians and caretakers of their families and communities. When you break a woman down, you break down all those around her. Male violence against women is one of the greatest barriers to achieving a healthy and thriving city. I continue to ask: “When will women matter enough?” Bold and urgent action is needed now.”

Marissa Kokkoros, Executive Director, Aura Freedom

Aura Freedom and Women's Habitat of Etobicoke, along with other organizations, grassroots groups, advocates, survivors, and more from across Toronto and Canada are officially calling on the City of Toronto to declare Intimate Partner Violence an epidemic.

Toronto leadership, will you answer this call?

To endorse this Urgent Call to Action, email info@aurafreedom.org with your name/organization and **“Endorsement for Toronto IPV Epidemic”** in the subject line and we will add you to our list of endorsements on our [campaign page here](#).

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