PREVENTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IS ESSENTIAL, TOO - A COVID-19 RECOVERY BRIEF

A CASE FOR STRENGTHENING INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM AND GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM TO PREVENT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE DURING COVID-19 AND THROUGH CANADA’S POST PANDEMIC RECOVERY
Created in the name of gender equality, Aura Freedom is a grassroots women's organization that works to eradicate gender-based violence and human trafficking through advocacy and education. We work with a diverse group of allies to achieve our goals.

Through education, advocacy, research, training, and partnership-building, Aura Freedom has implemented sustainable projects preventing and addressing gender-based violence and human trafficking in both Canada and South Asia. Our work has advanced gender equality, empowered marginalized women and given survivors anti-oppressive access to crucial services.

Aura Freedom is a champion for grassroots action. We are a non-governmental organization with no religious ties seeking to create long-lasting, systemic change. We are of the firm belief that when women and girls are educated and empowered, they become powerful catalysts for positive change whose success benefits everyone around them.

Aura Freedom is an intersectional feminist organization. Our ‘gender lenses’ are always on. Our awareness work highlights how gender inequality and other root causes perpetuate GBV and how equality can bring about positive change for everyone.
Addressing the root causes of gender-based violence and human trafficking is a fundamental part of Aura Freedom’s work. As an organization, we go deep.

Why?

Because if we do not address the root causes, then we will simply be doing damage control for the rest of our lives. When working to address and prevent gender-based violence, we must address gender inequality, systemic racism, colonialism, ableism, homo/transphobia, ableism, capitalism and more. We have to be in this for the ‘long haul’ and anyone doing this work knows that.

Women and girls living at the intersections of gender, race, ability and socio-economic status experience the highest rates of violence. When addressing gender-based violence and advancing the feminist movement, our work recognizes and centres the most marginalized women including Indigenous women, racialized women, immigrant and refugee women, women living with disabilities, gender diverse people, the Girl Child and others.

Moreover, Aura Freedom’s work addresses deeply entrenched and rigid gender norms that impede equity and dictate the way people “must” behave. We don’t shy away from rape culture, toxic masculinity, and sexism in our communities and in the media.

There is no quick fix to gender-based violence, but we are ready for the challenge.
Gender-based violence is a very old story of who is valued more, and who is valued less. It thrives in conditions of inequity. The antidote...is education.

Education is key. And although we might not be able to see it working in real time, it is RIGHT. The ripple effects of education will be seen for generations to come, and THAT’s how we create systemic, long-lasting change.

We believe inclusive and intersectional education that addresses the root causes of gender-based violence and human trafficking is the most effective form of prevention and we do our best to provide education that is barrier-free, trauma-informed and survivor-centred.

The result? Women, girls and gender diverse people from all backgrounds who are able to exercise their rights and live healthy lives free from violence.

Our primary indicator of the status of women and girls in Canada are the accounts of grassroots women’s organizations. It is only through listening to the ones with their ‘noses to the ground’ that we can see the full picture. We strive every day to amplify the voice of The Grassroots.
AT ITS HEART, AURA FREEDOM IS AN ORGANIZATION THAT SEeks TO ACHIEVE TRUE EQUITY FOR ALL, AS WE KNOW THAT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE THRIVES IN SITUATIONS OF INEQUITY AND WITHIN OPPRESSIVE, UNEQUAL POWER STRUCTURES.
For women in Canada who experience violence in their homes, every day is an emergency. Every day is life or death. For these women and their children, the COVID-19 crisis presents complex health risks that go beyond the disease itself.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently called the global surge in domestic violence due to country lockdowns “horrifying”. He’s right.

But the truth is, gender-based violence has always been horrifying. And now, with governments mandating social distancing and self-isolation, countless women and girls are even more isolated as they are asked to remain in the very place that is the most dangerous for them: HOME.

Grassroots feminist organizations knew what was coming. For some women, the lockdowns would mean increased frequency and severity of the violence they endure. For youth, it would mean experiencing increased online sexual exploitation and harassment. Fear, anxiety and economic pressure amount to increased household stress, with women bearing the brunt of that stress while trapped with abusive household members. Moreover, with schools, workplaces, restaurants and community programs closed, women and their children have fewer places to turn to for refuge.

From March 15th to July 22nd, 2020, at least 17 women and girls were killed as a result of domestic violence during the COVID lockdown. That’s 17 lives taken in just over two months. These femicides can be prevented.

The Assaulted Women’s Helpline is receiving many more calls for both space and support from women fleeing violence during COVID-19 in Canada.

Women’s Habitat in Toronto has told us that their spaces for domestic violence survivors are even more limited due to increased referrals from other sources.
Governments could have never predicted the impact of COVID-19, but they certainly could have predicted the spike in GBV that would come with it. After all, gender-based violence is not new and there isn’t a country in the world that is free from it.

Before COVID-19 was even deemed a threat in Canada, we called gender-based violence a ‘national emergency’ for Canadian women in Aura Freedom’s Beijing +25 report entitled Relentless Resilience, released in early 2020.

We were not being dramatic.

- The murders and disappearances of Indigenous women, girls and 2-spirit people in Canada have amounted to genocide.
- On any given night in Canada, more than 6000 women and children sleep in shelters because it isn’t safe at home.
- On average, every three days one woman or girl is killed in Canada. Globally, 50,000 women are killed each year by partners.

Pandemic proportions, one might say.

Marginalized women are at an even higher risk of GBV, including Indigenous women, racialized women, women living with disabilities, women living in poverty, migrant women, single mothers, and others facing inequities.

So, if Canada already knew that GBV was an urgent issue and studies around the world have shown that women and girls are even more vulnerable during emergencies, then why weren’t we prepared for the surge in gender-based violence?
For governments to effectively prevent GBV during times of emergency, they must be actively preventing GBV at all times. Moreover, plans to address gender-based violence in times of emergency must precede national measures like lockdowns to avoid what is happening around the world right now.

The problem is that in many countries, women’s organizations, domestic violence shelters, and sexual assault centres are hanging by a thread at the best of times. Chronically underfunded and overworked, grassroots organizations addressing GBV rarely receive what they need, even though they are doing some of the most important work in the world.

And now, they are up against even more.

**When will women and girls matter enough?**

Gender-based violence is a global pandemic. We must act accordingly.

*Why is violence against women still happening? What measures can be put in place to PREVENT the violence, as opposed to solely responding to it?* Every day, women’s groups find themselves chasing their tales. *WHY?*
When responding to global health crises, it is imperative to do so with women and girls at the forefront. This doesn’t just mean considering women, who comprise 80% of non-profit and charity workers in Canada and 70% of the global healthcare workforce. It means bringing them to the table, listening to them, and employing them to create sensitive and powerful responses that tend to the unique needs of women and girls during uncertain times. Partnerships and collaborations across sectors are key and funding for grassroots organizations responding to GBV and preventing GBV must be adequate at all times - not just during emergencies.

The current global trend of increased domestic violence during COVID-19 lockdowns also points to a dire need for long-term solutions that reach beyond this pandemic. Education to tackle the root causes of gender-based violence must be prioritized by leaders. Gender inequality, misogyny, systemic racism, colonialism, ableism, homophobia, and harmful gender norms must be addressed to create an equal world that is finally free of gender-based violence.

This will take long-term, robust investments, and proactive planning. It will take courage, resilience, and patience. And although governments might not be able to 'see' the changes happening in real-time, it is the only way to truly end the violence for good.

In a world that has collectively mobilized to respond to COVID-19, from finding a vaccine to softening the blow to the economy, can we not mobilize in the same way for the millions of women and girls who have experienced violence at pandemic rates for centuries?

Of course, we can. What is needed is sustainable funding that trusts The Grassroots and political will.
In their new report entitled *Resetting Normal*, the Canadian Women’s Foundation calls the women’s sector “essential services” and calls for funding of grassroots groups that not only provide frontline services, but also those providing advocacy and education to advance gender equality.

“Women’s movements are made up of gender equity seeking groups carrying out policy and advocacy work on the local, regional, and national levels; playing an important role in promoting and advancing gender equal outcomes for women in all their diversity; and addressing the underlying inequalities that make women more vulnerable structurally.”

*Resetting Normal is a series of reports on gender equality and COVID-19 in Canada that explores risks to human rights exposed by the pandemic and propose new ways to build a gender-equal Canada in pandemic recovery efforts.*

READ THE FULL REPORT

According to the Global Fund for Women, funding for grassroots organizations is approximately 1% of all funding, and even less for women-led organizations. But we know that it’s The Grassroots who does all the heavy lifting when it comes to gender-based violence.

Violence prevention should be part of Canada’s COVID-19 recovery plan, warns Heidi Illingworth, ombudsman for victims of crime

In an open letter penned to Dr. Theresa Tam last week, Illingworth implored Canada’s chief public health officer to include violence-prevention in the federal recovery response, saying it’s “critical” that resources be directed at preventing behaviours that lead to intimate partner violence, sexual violence and child abuse.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE

UN Women has launched a campaign to raise awareness of “The Shadow Pandemic” of violence against women during COVID-19. Check it out.

Grassroots women’s advocacy groups save lives and support communities.
Our own research has also told us that The Grassroots women’s sector knows what it needs to flourish.

After interviews with numerous frontline workers in Toronto working in domestic violence shelters, sexual assault centres, refugee drop-ins and more, Aura Freedom released its Relentless Resilience report in February 2020. The report is a sobering look at the effects of GBV on Canadian life and was written as a Parallel Report for the 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration.

Before the COVID-19 lockdown, Aura Freedom’s team was set to attend the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York to present the results of this report at a special event.

No matter where we went and who we interviewed during the creation of Relentless Resilience, The Grassroots told us that what was needed was not more funding to respond to gender-based violence, but advocacy and education to PREVENT it.

It’s time we listen to The Grassroots. We know what we need to survive and thrive and survive.

It’s time to end the years of struggling in the women’s sector and fund grassroots activist groups to do the work they were born to do.

Download ‘Relentless Resilience’ at aurafreedom.org
When you break a woman down, you break down her family and entire community. When women and girls are healthy and safe, their families and communities thrive. When countries consider the rights of women and girls a national priority, those countries flourish.

Ending GBV will bring Canada increased health, wealth, peace, and climate justice. Ending GBV can help get post-COVID Toronto and Canada back on track. Ending GBV will help Canada achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

For a look at how gender-based violence is affecting every single aspect of Canadian society and the achievement of all 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, check out our infographic on the next page entitled #EndGBVToAchieveSDGs or [DOWNLOAD THE INFOGRAPHIC HERE](#).

“We have a responsibility to take care of each other, not just out of the goodness of our hearts or our sense of duty, but for our very survival.”
Sharon Avery, President & CEO, Toronto Foundation

“Domestic violence costs Canadians $7.4 billion a year. I resent that we have to put a price tag on gender-based violence to entice leaders to invest in the protection of women. But, we’re all out of tricks.”
Marissa Kokkoros, Executive Director, Aura Freedom
Gender-based violence is affecting every aspect of Canadian life and hindering the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This infographic is a look at gender-based violence in Canada across the SDGs created by Aura Freedom.
We rise by uplifting others

To partner with Aura Freedom to prevent gender-based violence and advance development in Canada, contact Marissa Kokkoros, Executive Director marissa@aurafreedom.org

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