

# Declaring Intimate Partner Violence an Epidemic

*After the Declaration – What AMO members can do to help prevent femicide*

## Background

On September 22, 2015, in Renfrew County, Anastasia Kuzyk, Nathalie Warmerdam and Carol Culleton were killed in their homes by a fifty-seven-year-old man. All of the women knew him, two were former intimate partners. In June 2022, an inquest was held by the Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario to examine the events leading up to the murders and consider changes needed to prevent future tragedies. [86 recommendations](#) were made by the Jury members.

**Recommendation 1:** Declare intimate partner violence (IPV) an epidemic. [95 communities in Ontario](#) have since made the declaration<sup>1</sup>.

## AMO Members can play a role in prevention

This brief is written to provide information and ideas for AMO members to help grow a whole community response to IPV. If it is true that *everyone has a role to play in femicide prevention*, then it is important to become aware of, and support people in the different roles, and to learn the role each of us can play.

## The Case for System Change: IPV Femicide is Preventable

There were 62 confirmed femicides in Ontario in 2023. These are almost always preventable deaths. Preventable because the pattern of behaviour is predictable. Violence in relationships escalates over time without intervention. **Coercive control** is the term that describes the pattern of behaviour. It is recognized as the most dangerous form of IPV.<sup>2</sup>

As a society, our current response is reactive and crisis-oriented, most often after the fact of violence occurring. The costs are enormous. Police routinely report multiple visits to a home before a charge is laid. Only after the charge is laid are resources deployed. As a result, police, child welfare and the justice system report that *over a third of case files* are intimate partner and family violence related. Shelters are forced to turn away women and children who are fleeing violence because they cannot meet the increasing demand. The [impacts on children](#) are lifelong.

There is a cascade of human, social and economic costs that flow from every IPV situation. The opportunities to intervene earlier, reduce risk and stop the violence are not happening because **we are working at the wrong end of the problem**. A strictly crisis response is incredibly expensive in human and economic costs, short-sighted and unsustainable. As a result, our service system is buckling under current pressures. The response system itself is in crisis.

It is important to see IPV in the larger context and not as an isolated issue. Violence rates increase when people have to struggle to survive, can't find affordable housing, feed their family and have little or no support to treat mental health, deal with addictions or to access healthcare. Women and gender-diverse people who also

The term **femicide** is used to describe the killing of a woman or girl because of her gender. It highlights the gender-based motivation behind certain acts of violence against women, which often stem from misogyny, discrimination, or a perceived sense of entitlement over women. The use of the term is intended to bring attention to the unique social and cultural factors that contribute to violence against women and to distinguish these crimes from other types of homicides.

The United Nations and other international organizations have adopted the term "femicide" to raise awareness of the widespread issue of gender-based violence.

\*\*\*\*

## [Reclaiming Power & Place](#)

Indigenous women and girls are seven times more likely to be killed than non-Indigenous women in Canada.

In 2019, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls final report was published. It is a powerful vision for change. The report calls on Canadians to *establish a new framework* to prioritize relationships and the voices of Indigenous women in each encounter. (pgs. 89-101)

<sup>1</sup> As of Nov 1, 2024. See Building a Bigger Wave.

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Government amended the *Divorce Act* in 2021 to recognize the significant harm of coercive control.

experience discrimination of racism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia and those living in rural, remote and northern communities have even higher rates of IPV that can be attributed to social inequities.

## **We Can All Do Better**

There is much that can be done at the local level to help advance a prevention agenda. There are 30 years of inquests and death review recommendations to guide change. Leadership from all levels of society is needed as well as a clear commitment to collective action. There is a wealth of knowledge to address IPV in every community.

Long-term strategic investments in prevention are needed. The investments should be guided by evidence-based recommendations. Implementation is already visible at the local level in communities that have declared IPV an epidemic. What comes next?

## **What You Can Do: Suggested Actions for Municipalities and Elected Officials**

### **1. Learn about IPV: Recognize-Respond-Refer**

Recommendations have repeatedly referenced the need to *teach everyone* to be able to recognize warning signs and indications of escalating risk, how to respond safely and effectively and where to refer to find help in the community. [Neighbours, Friends & Families](#) (NFF) is the Ontario public education campaign that can be shared freely and promoted.

**Action:** Take the NFF [one-hour online course](#). Encourage your colleagues, staff, neighbours, friends and family members to do the same.

**Action:** Read the monthly and annual femicide reports published by the [Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses](#) (OAITH)

#### **Learn about the organizations in your community that are providing services and supports**

**Action:** Visit your local organizations who have expertise working with victims and perpetrators of GBV. These organizations include the Women's Shelter, Partner Assault Response (PAR) program or a Sexual Assault Centre (SAC). Many communities also have a Violence Against Women Coordinating Committee (VAWCC), a multi sector table working to coordinate their services to prevent femicide. Ask to attend a meeting.

**Action:** Ask your local Shelter / Coordinating Committee for an annual presentation to Council on the state of IPV in your community and to update on the implementation of recommendations, projects, campaigns and innovations. You can find a list of coordinating committees here: [VAWCC Map](#)

### **2. Develop a practice of consultation**

**Action:** Support your Community Leaders (Shelter, PARS, SAC) and respect the expertise they hold by insisting on a practice of consultation and inclusion for community planning processes. They can support the Community Safety and Wellbeing planning process and help to evaluate effective and impacts and outcomes.

### **3. Create a Local Calendar of Events**

**4. Action:** Support community agencies by attending events that mark important dates such as the [16 days of action](#) from Nov 25<sup>th</sup> - Dec 6<sup>th</sup>, [Dec 6<sup>th</sup> vigils](#) for IPV and Indigenous events on June 21<sup>st</sup> ([National Indigenous People's Day](#)) and Sept 30<sup>th</sup> (Orange shirt day / [National Day for Truth and Reconciliation](#)).

**5. Support other municipal leaders calling for Provincial investments to stabilize funding in all communities to meet the needs for service and to make strategic investments in early intervention and prevention**

## Do Community Safety and Wellbeing Plans (CSWB) include Femicide Prevention?

Not all CSWB plans currently recognize the need to address intimate partner / gender-based violence as a public health epidemic. Some communities have identified IPV-GBV prevention as a pillar to ensure there is a dedicated focus. In every community there are community experts who can advise and support the development of the CSWB planning process.

Here are several key reasons why femicide prevention should be a core part of CSWB plans:

1. **High Rates of Gender-Based Violence:** In Ontario, as in other parts of Canada, rates of gender-based violence, particularly intimate partner violence, are significant. Women are disproportionately victims of violent crimes, especially within their homes or relationships, where the risk of femicide is elevated. A CSWB Plan that includes femicide prevention can specifically address these threats.
2. **Human Rights and Social Justice:** The right to safety and life is a fundamental human right. Femicide, as an extreme outcome of gender-based violence, is not only a safety issue but a social justice issue. Preventing it aligns with Ontario's commitments to uphold and promote human rights, ensuring all citizens - especially women, children and marginalized people - are safe and supported.
3. **Community Impact:** Femicide has a profound impact on families, friends, and communities. The trauma of losing a loved one to violence ripples through communities, affecting mental health, creating fear, and destabilizing social networks. By actively working to prevent femicide, CSWB Plans foster safer, healthier communities for everyone.
4. **Prevention over Reaction:** CSWB Plans are meant to be proactive. Femicide prevention requires understanding and addressing root causes such as social inequality, economic insecurity, and the normalization of violence against women. Effective prevention efforts can reduce the need for more costly interventions at the point of crisis.
5. **Data-Driven Approach:** The inclusion of femicide prevention in CSWB Plans supports evidence-based policy making. Organizations like the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) collect data on femicides that can inform targeted interventions, highlight patterns, and support the allocation of resources where they're most needed.
6. **Legislation and Policy Alignment:** Ontario's CSWB Plans are meant to align with provincial and national commitments to reduce violence against women. Including femicide prevention supports federal strategies, like Canada's National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence, and demonstrates Ontario's commitment to these broader goals.
7. **Intersectionality:** Femicide prevention within CSWB Plans can address the specific vulnerabilities faced by marginalized groups, including Indigenous, immigrant, LGBTQ2+, and low-income women. These groups experience higher risks of violence and femicide, and a CSWB Plan can support tailored, culturally sensitive interventions to protect these communities.
8. **Collaboration and Resource Sharing:** CSWB Plans encourage collaboration among municipalities, law enforcement, health providers, and social services. Femicide prevention requires a coordinated approach, and CSWB Plans provide an organized framework for these entities to share resources and expertise, creating a more comprehensive and effective response.

By incorporating femicide prevention, Ontario's CSWB Plans take a bold stance toward creating safer communities, protecting vulnerable populations, and committing to long-term change that addresses systemic issues behind intimate partner and gender-based violence.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. How is femicide defined?

Femicide as a term was coined in 1976 by Diana Russell (Corradi et al. 2016, 976). It was promoted as an alternative to the gender-neutral term homicide to highlight the killing of women primarily for the reason of being women. Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses (OAITH) tracks and reports on femicides in Ontario. You can view the reports: [We Count Femicide Because | Femicide in Ontario](#) | OAITH's femicide definition includes a gender-based killing of a woman, child, trans woman, 2-Spirited Person, or gender non-conforming individual where a man has been charged in relation to the death.

The majority of femicide victims are killed by someone they know. Between 2011 and 2021, two-thirds (66%) of the victims of gender-related homicide were killed by an intimate partner, and 28% were killed by a non-spousal family member, most often the victim's son (49%). [The Daily — Gender-related homicide of women and girls in Canada, 2011 to 2021](#).

### 2. What is Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)?

In Canada, intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined as any form of physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, or financial abuse that occurs within an intimate relationship. This includes violence or aggression by a current or former spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, or dating partner. IPV encompasses a range of abusive behaviors intended to control, intimidate, or harm an intimate partner and can occur in both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships.

The Government of Canada recognizes the following types of intimate partner violence:

- Physical Abuse: Acts of physical violence such as hitting, slapping, punching, choking, or using weapons that result in physical harm or fear of harm.
- Sexual Abuse: Coercion or force used to engage in sexual activities without consent, including rape, unwanted touching, or sexual humiliation.
- Emotional or Psychological Abuse: Behaviors meant to emotionally hurt, degrade, or control a partner, such as constant criticism, verbal insults, threats, isolation, and manipulation.
- Financial Abuse: Control over financial resources, limiting access to money, or restricting a partner's ability to work or go to school.
- Stalking and Harassment: Unwanted surveillance, following, persistent messaging, or threatening actions designed to instill fear.
- Technological or Digital Abuse: Using digital platforms to control, harass, monitor, or intimidate a partner, including tracking social media activity, sharing private information without consent, or hacking.

The Canadian Criminal Code includes provisions that address many forms of intimate partner violence, although IPV itself isn't defined as a specific offense. However, criminal acts associated with IPV, like assault, criminal harassment, and sexual assault, are prosecutable offenses. Canadian law also recognizes the impacts of IPV on children and families, with particular protections and support available to help survivors.

### 3. Is IPV the same as domestic violence, family violence?

Intimate partner violence and domestic violence are terms that are often used interchangeably. Domestic violence is the language used in legislation such as The *Occupational Health & Safety Act*. Family violence is a broader term that includes spouses and/or other family members who may be perpetrating violence.

### 4. What about men? Don't they also experience IPV?

Yes, men also experience intimate partner violence (IPV), and it is an important issue that deserves recognition and support. Women as victims come to public attention more often because they experience higher rates of serious injury, hospitalization and death. Men can and do face abuse from intimate partners, and this can occur in both opposite-sex and same-sex relationships. Efforts are ongoing to increase awareness and provide more inclusive support to all individuals affected by intimate partner violence.

## **5. What is coercive control?**

[Coercive control](#) is a pattern of behavior used by one partner to dominate, manipulate and control the other partner in an intimate relationship. The abusive behaviour involves the ongoing experience, or threat of, physical and/or sexual violence. A series of tactics are used to create fear, dependency, and powerlessness in the victim. It can include psychological, emotional, financial, and isolation. Controlling abusive behaviour is targeted at the partner and can be subtle or hidden behind closed doors, making it difficult to identify or prove. People who commit this type of abuse often continue or escalate the violence after separation or divorce.

[Research](#) consistently shows that coercive control is a strong predictor of femicide in intimate partner relationships. Understanding the role of coercive control in femicide is critical for developing effective risk assessments, safety planning, and support for those in abusive relationships.

Men are most often the perpetrators of coercive control, particularly in heterosexual relationships<sup>3</sup>. Cultural and societal norms can reinforce expectations around male authority and control, which may contribute to a higher incidence of men who feel entitled to have control over their partners. Coercive control can also occur in same-sex and trans relationships. Women also engage in controlling and abusive behaviors, though the motivations, methods, and impacts may differ somewhat based on gender dynamics and societal expectations. Femicide prevention focuses on male

## **6. What are the demographics of femicide in Canada? Which groups experience higher rates?**

The Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative (CDHPI) has identified several groups in Canada that experience higher rates of femicide, emphasizing the need for targeted prevention and intervention strategies.

[Literature Review Report | Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative.](#)

- Indigenous women and girls
- Women in Rural, Remote and Northern communities
- Immigrants and refugees
- Children exposed to domestic violence

---

<sup>3</sup> Stark, Evan, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, 2nd ed (New York, 2024; online ed, Oxford Academic, 23 Nov. 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197639986.001.0001>.