

**FEDERAL STRATEGY ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
BRIEFING NOTES FOR STATUS OF WOMEN CANADA AND THE DEPARTMENT
OF JUSTICE CANADA**

ISSUE: Disaster Preparedness and Support

In the aftermath of a disaster, community-based anti-violence programs in the affected areas face an increased demand for services and decreased capacity to provide these services. Disaster planning must prepare for the needs of community-based anti-violence programs and commit to providing support.

KEY POINTS

- Gender-based violence often increases following a disaster, with women and girls at greater risk of sexual and domestic violence, both in the immediate aftermath and long-term recovery period after the disaster has occurred.
 - Rates of domestic violence increased following a massive ice storm in Quebec and Ontario in 1998.
 - In the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in Miami, there was a 50% increase in calls to the local community helpline.
 - In the seven months following the eruption of Mt. St. Helen, there was a 46% increase in police-reported domestic violence.
 - Following Hurricane Katrina, there were reports of women experiencing violence from their partners. The hurricane displaced thousands of poor and African American women into temporary camps; one survey found that, following this displacement, rates of sexual assault were triple the national average.
 - There have been widespread reports of sexual assault committed by volunteers brought in to assist with post-disaster recovery.
- Disasters can create a difficult set of circumstances for survivors of sexual and/or domestic violence.
 - Women fleeing violence may find themselves housed at the same evacuation centres as their abusers.
 - Victims/survivors may be re-traumatized in the aftermath of a disaster, often due to renewed feelings of powerlessness and loss of control.
- Disasters often result in destabilization within families (e.g., loss of jobs, loss of homes). Feelings of helplessness may cause perpetrators to respond with violence toward their partners.
- The resources lost through disasters (e.g., income, affordable housing, child care) can also limit the choices for victims/survivors. It may be more difficult to leave an abusive relationship, or women may be coerced to return to an abusive relationship.

- Following a disaster, the attention of first responders and the community (including anti-violence workers) will be primarily focused on the disaster itself, making them less available to respond to sexual and domestic violence calls.
- Community-based anti-violence programs are likely to face unforeseen challenges in providing essential support services – resulting from destruction of service infrastructure, lack of funding to address clients’ needs, and higher demand than the program is able to accommodate.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

We urge the federal government to:

- Ensure that gender-based violence awareness efforts inform the general public about the increase of gender-based violence in the aftermath of disasters.
- Explicitly and comprehensively address the issue of gender-based violence within disaster legislation, policies, and planning.
- Facilitate collaboration between community-based anti-violence programs and emergency management systems prior to a disaster. Ensure that everyone involved in these efforts is well informed about the increases in domestic and sexual violence we often see in the aftermath of a disaster.
- Ensure that disaster response funds specify allocations for community-based anti-violence programs – anticipating an increased need for these services and simultaneously diverting resources to address other aspects of disaster response.
- As resources for response are limited in the aftermath of a disaster, inform communities how victims/survivors of sexual and domestic violence can receive help and support.
- Educate government policy-makers, communities, and relevant organizations (community-based anti-violence programs, emergency managers, etc.) about the social impact of disasters, including the increased risk of gender-based violence.
- Provide training on gender-based violence and safety planning for emergency managers and first responders.
- Emergency social services and emergency managers should connect with anti-violence organizations before disaster strikes in order to better prepare for and coordinate responses in the event of a disaster.

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